



## **Venezuela Signals Possible Shift to Dialogue**

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Recent events in Venezuela have demonstrated a directional shift towards a more responsive dialogue in the embattled country's search for a political consensus. Polling and statements made in response to President Maduro's call for a national constituent assembly have shown support for peace, despite concerns on both sides over the erosion of democratic institutions. This shift is a substantive one for Venezuela, which hitherto has faced significant setbacks to its peace process as protests rage across the country.

### **Papal Talks Contrast Almagro's Enmity**

Ongoing efforts by Pope Francis and former presidents of Latin American countries, including leaders of the Dominican Republic and Panama as well as Spain, have set a precedent that would allow for dialogue in the region. Maduro, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez, and Chief Negotiator Jorge Rodríguez met in February with former Spanish Prime Minister José Zapatero and former presidents Martín Torrijos of Panama and Leonel Fernández of the Dominican Republic in an attempt to salvage previously failed negotiations.<sup>i</sup> Pope Francis has additionally called for meetings between the government and the opposition at the Vatican, as face-to-face negotiation would accelerate dialogue as opposed to the indirect confrontations of the recent past.<sup>ii</sup>

These efforts are a stark contrast to the actions of the Organization of American States (OAS), where antagonism under Secretary General Luis Almagro can only increase political polarization. Almagro has displayed a fixation regarding Venezuela, focusing hostility on the crisis while simultaneously remaining silent on abuses witnessed elsewhere in Latin America. Almagro has also personalized the conflict, at times responding to the actions of the Maduro administration in a deeply insulting manner. An eight-page open letter to imprisoned opposition leader Leopoldo López in August 2016<sup>iii</sup> reflects his use of his OAS position to make stronger and more personal responses to the crisis.<sup>iv</sup> In December 2015, Almagro attempted to delegitimize the elections in Venezuela, further demonstrating his indifference to a peaceful transition.

By questioning the willingness of the Maduro government to engage in legitimate democratic processes, the OAS could catalyze opposition movements, leading to increased violence and loss of life. Instead of acting as an unbiased mediator, by inserting himself directly into Venezuelan affairs, Almagro has failed to fulfill the

organization's role as a non-confrontational regional body. The interventionist stance has done a disservice to those like Pope Francis who have called for honest dialogue, and may serve to further exacerbate tensions between the government and the opposition. Almagro's comments, should they continue, will further inflame violence and retard the small but significant progress made by those who support dialogue, not conflict. Instead of fanning the flames, the OAS should condemn violence on all sides and should call for a peaceful resolution.

### **Polling Supports Dialogue**

Hinterlaces polling results released May 28 demonstrate the Venezuelan public's strong commitment to an internal dialogue and peace process. Most Venezuelans want to independently solve their country's issues as 89 percent of citizens polled disagreed with an international military intervention to oust Maduro. This places public opinion at odds with the position of some members of the Organization of American States, which has repeatedly called for intervention in the past. Just 9 percent of respondents supported military intervention. An overwhelming majority of those polled supported a dialogue between the government and the opposition, with 84 percent in favor of talks and just 13 percent opposed. More than one-third, or 36 percent, of those polled called for the immediate ouster of Maduro, while 63 percent wanted to wait until elections in December 2018, allowing Maduro to complete his mandate before making a decision. Finally, of those polled who believed the ouster of Maduro was necessary to advance the peace process, 64 percent believe actions taken following his exit would be more important than the exit itself.<sup>v</sup>

### **National Constituent Assembly Faces Opposition**

President Maduro announced on June 1 that elections for the national constituent assembly will take place on July 30. 35,438 social sector candidates and 19,876 regional candidates have registered, totaling 55, 314 candidates. To be placed on the ballot, regional candidates need a list of signatures constituting 3 percent of their electorate while social sector candidates need between 500 and 1,000 signatures. The national constituent assembly will consist of a total of 545 elected officials, with 364 regional, 168 sectoral, and 8 indigenous seats.<sup>vi</sup>

Maduro's call for a national constituent assembly has created considerable consternation among the opposition and even high-ranking government officials. Opposition coalition Bureau of the Unidad Democratica (MUD) called for a Gran Plantón, or National Stand, on June 5 to reject statements by National Electoral Council (CNE) President Tibisay Lucena.<sup>vii</sup> Chief among these statements is the call for the constituent assembly, which the MUD has decried as anti-democracy in nature and has caused the Gran Plantón to be extended by 12 hours.<sup>viii</sup> The Gran Plantón blocked roads in peaceful protest, waving banners and flags and covering the road with debris.<sup>ix</sup>

Attorney General Luisa Ortega Díaz has voiced her opposition to the Venezuelan Supreme Court's ruling that the call for the constituent assembly is constitutional.

Ortega has stated that in order for the Venezuelan state to call for a constituent assembly there must be a referendum on its formulation. However, according to the Supreme Court decision, Article 348 of the Venezuelan Constitution states that the constituent assembly may be called for either by the president, the National Assembly, municipal councils, or 15 percent of all Venezuelan voters.<sup>x</sup> Ortega said “It seems that [participatory] and protagonistic democracy, which costs Venezuelans so much [to get], is being eliminated,” and that moving forward without an popular vote is a “setback” for human rights.<sup>xi</sup> Ortega has filed a request against the Supreme Court decision for a constituent assembly, and instead is calling for a referendum on its initial formation.<sup>xii</sup>

In response to claims made by the opposition that the constituent assembly will be anti-democratic, Maduro has pledged to hold a referendum on the constitution it creates. He announced on state television that “the new constitution will go to a consultative referendum so it is the people who say whether they are in agreement or not with the new, strengthened constitution.”<sup>xiii</sup> Venezuela’s opposition did not noticeably react, but those who have called for immediate elections are expected to use the referendum as a forum on Maduro himself.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Student Voices are Heard by Ernesto Villegas**

On June 2, 2017 anti-government student protested at the Venezuelan state television channel VTV. The protesters called for action against the persistent violence in Venezuela, particularly calling for justice against those responsible for the death of Juan Pernalet, who died in an opposition protest on April 26th. The student protests were led by Rafaela Requesens, the president of the University Centers Federation at the Central University of Venezuela. In response to the Minister of Communications and Information, Ernesto Villegas, Requesens called for bipartisan dialogue from respective political affiliations, as “journalists are here to tell the truth, journalists are here to [reliably] report what happens in Venezuela no matter what side they’re on.”<sup>xv</sup>

Recent developments in Venezuela demonstrate the importance of a shift to productive dialogue, rather than violence. The public, although divided on ideology, remains committed to an end goal of democratic peace. Rivalry between opposition and the government, furthered by calls for destabilizing intervention, can only further political hostility. Venezuela's shift towards a responsive dialogue is necessary for democratic consolidation, not political polarization. Only through bilateral discussion can Venezuela reach peace from chaos.

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