

VENEZUELA ALERT Running Out of Time

Miguel Diaz

- Chavez has brought Venezuela to the edge of the precipice by continuing with his incendiary rhetoric, by his underhanded maneuvering to undermine the institutional checks on his authority, and by using his Bolivarian Circle shock troops to intimidate the opposition.
- The opposition too is to blame for the current crisis. It has lacked patience, realism, and the unity to speak with one voice. Consequently, it lacks the respect abroad that other civil society movements in opposition to unpopular Latin American regimes have been able to muster.
- The U.S. must try a new approach to diffuse this political time bomb, as the current policy is not paying off.

Venezuela is on the verge of civil war and both President Hugo Chavez and the opposition are to blame. Last Friday's incidents, in which three people were shot to death and over 25 were left injured, only underscored the very limited amount of time this country has left to come to its senses before even more blood is spilled. Washington and the rest of the international community has the moral responsibility to get more engaged. The U.S.' political and economic national security interests in Venezuela alone are important enough to command Washington's full attention.

Chavez has brought Venezuela to the edge of the precipice by continuing with his incendiary rhetoric, by his underhanded and, some would argue, unconstitutional maneuvering to undermine the institutional checks on his authority, and by using his Bolivarian Circle shock troops to intimidate the opposition. Most recently, he added fuel to the fire by calling on the National Guard to assume police functions in Caracas. This last decision has proven a major mistake; the National Guard's resort to excessive force to quell opposition protests only exacerbated the opposition's apprehension that what Chavez has in mind is nothing short of establishing an autocratic regime in Venezuela. Particularly disconcerting is that by bringing the National Guard into the picture, Chavez galvanized the opposition, just when it was about to call off the strike and return to the OAS-sponsored and supervised dialogue.

The opposition, however, is not without some culpability

for the deteriorating situation. It lacks patience and realism, and has failed to come together to speak with one voice. Furthermore, the Coordinadora Democrática—as the opposition front is commonly known—has failed to stay on the high road, choosing instead to fight this one out where Chavez wants it fought—in the streets. As a result, the opposition has failed to muster the respect abroad that other civil society movements in opposition to unpopular Latin American regimes have.

As the recent killings demonstrate, Venezuela has started down the slippery slope of violence. The question is whether or not it can put an end to it before it spirals out of control. Venezuelans should know the risks of letting this situation go on too far for they have seen how similar polarization in neighboring Colombia triggered a cycle of violence 40 years ago that, tens of thousands of deaths later, still has not been brought to a stop. This bloodletting is not even the product of a difference of opinion about how to address the many real, structural challenges the country faces. Instead, it is merely about one man, Hugo Chavez, and whether he should stay or go.

How to Respond

Until now, Washington's policy toward Venezuela has amounted to encouraging both sides to negotiate a compromise on reaching an electoral exit out of the

crisis and using the good offices of the OAS for that purpose. Unfortunately, this policy has not panned out, although Secretary General Cesar Gaviria, almost heroically, has not given up trying, and the talks continue. The recent turn of events, however, begs the question of whether Washington should try a new approach to diffuse this political time bomb from exploding. It probably should.

For starters, Washington should be less inhibited about casting blame for the current state of affairs, as it currently gives the impression of being indifferent. Washington should stake out its reaction to the recent events for the sake of preserving its credibility and influence with future governments in Venezuela and in the region more broadly. At a minimum, Washington should point out that it was Chavez's inflammatory rhetoric that motivated some of his followers to resort to violence last Friday. Granted, the U.S. Department of State has recently called the Chavez administration to task for its intransigence in its negotiations with the opposition, but that does not go far enough. The ante needs to be upped.

Two, the United States should encourage the OAS to take an even higher-profile posture in this crisis. Until now, the OAS has limited itself to serving as a facilitator. A more valuable role it can play is that of arbiter. Specifically, the OAS can be the one to decide on the single issue that Chavez and the opposition cannot seem to agree on—the contours and timetable of an early election. The polls suggest that most Venezuelans want to avoid civil war at all costs and thus would welcome the OAS playing such a role. All this initiative would require is that the majority of Venezuela's Congress support it, a likely scenario, given how narrow Chavez's majority in Congress is and how traumatized many Congress members have been by the recent turn of events.

Complementing the above measures, the Bush administration should continue to encourage those few voices of moderation that are left in Caracas. Venezuela's Congress, in particular, deserves U.S. encouragement and merits a greater profile in the resolution of this crisis than it has been given. Thus, it would not be a bad idea for OAS Secretary General Cesar Gaviria to meet and work with the member of congress at reaching a compromise, at least the latter have been elected as representatives of the people unlike the designees to the OAS-sponsored negotiations. Both the Bush administration and the OAS could particularly work with the Boston Group, a group of 19 members of congressmen who visited Washington and Boston this past summer at the invitation of members of the U.S. Congress. This group of both pro- and anti-Chavez legislators has distinguished itself with its attempt to establish a serious and civil dialogue for finding consensus. A delegation composed of Congressmen Cass Ballenger (R-NC), William Delahunt (D-MA), and

Gregory Meeks (D-NY) were planning to go to Venezuela last week for such purposes but the trip was cancelled for security concerns. Hopefully when the coast clears, the three congressmen could undertake the trip, preferably joined this time by other senior leaders of the U.S. Congress.

Although it may not make much of a difference in the short term, consideration should also be given to encouraging civil society groups from both sides to seek consensus, if need be by also taking them out of the country to avail them of a more hospitable environment for dialogue. What may surprise some is that there are reasonable voices of "Chavismo" who have thought through, at greater length, the need for major reforms and do not believe Chavez is indispensable. Unfortunately, they have been overshadowed by Chavez's vitriolic nature and even intimidated into keeping a low profile by Chavez's more radical supporters. They need to be identified and courted.

It also would not hurt for the United States to continue to hammer home the point that this crisis is for civilians alone to resolve—not the military. Ironically, the military has been one of the few institutions to maintain its independence throughout this drama, choosing last April not to shoot at either the opposition or the Chavistas. Since then, it has been under constant pressure from both Chavez's supporters and the opposition to take sides. So far, the military has maintained its institutional honor, but the pressure persists. To keep the military above the fray, the Bush administration can take advantage of the good relations U.S. military officers have with their Venezuelan counterparts to remind them that they should carefully consider their actions, especially with respect to employing lethal force against civilians. There should be no doubt among Venezuela's armed forces that the spotlight is on them, and that the world will hold them accountable for any untoward behavior.

Finally, the U.S. government should use any leverage and contacts it has at its disposal to compel the two sides to find common ground. Official U.S. relations with Chavez have hit rock bottom, evidenced by the public jousting that took place two weeks ago between Venezuelan vice president Vicente Rangel and Otto Reich, the former U.S. assistant secretary of state for hemispheric affairs and, currently, the secretary of state's special envoy to Latin America. Thus, it is time for Secretary Powell to step in. Colin Powell still commands respect from all sides and, as a military man, has both Chavez's and the armed forces' attention. One thing Powell can do is to convene the foreign ministers of the region, or even the United Nations Security Council, for an emergency meeting on Venezuela. Secretary Powell should also consider appointing

someone with credibility and experience in dealing with such crisis to serve as a Special Envoy to Venezuela, charged with coordinating the US response to this policy conundrum.

Some members of the U.S. Congress (Rep. Ballenger, Rep. Delahunt, and Rep. Meeke) have also accumulated some political capital with the Venezuelan president, and this is the time to use it. In their upcoming trip to Venezuela, they can impress upon Chavez the importance of taking the lead in decompressing the situation by, among other things, returning the policing functions to the police and most crucial, calling general elections in an efficient, transparent manner as soon as it can be carried out. The U.S. government should also enlist the support of the two individuals, who—next to Fidel Castro—probably have the most influence on Chavez. They are Brazil's current president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and newly elected president, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, who are both in the U.S. this week. At a minimum, they should be consulted on how Washington might work together with Brazil to persuade Chavez to show some moderation.

With respect to the opposition, the U.S. government may not have much influence, but the AFL-CIO does, at least with its de facto leader, CTV president Carlos Ortega. It supported Ortega's fight to be recognized as the duly elected leader of the CTV in both the United States and international forums, and extended the red carpet treatment to him as they shepherded him through Washington when Ortega visited earlier this year. The AFL-CIO should remind Ortega that if he really has the interest of Venezuela's workers at heart, he should do everything possible to avoid bloodshed, as it will be mostly workers who will bare the brunt of this violence. Moreover, he should be reminded that the perpetuation of this crisis will do little to attract the badly needed foreign investment that the country needs to generate jobs.

In sum, there is a wide political chasm that Venezuela will have to bridge in order to avoid catastrophe. The objective is pretty clear. On the one hand, Chavez must accept the fact that a country is not a barracks that can be ordered around at will. He must learn to listen, to conciliate, and even to concede on major points where the opposition is sufficiently large to represent an important element of civil society. But the opposition, too, must accept the fact that Chavez, for all his deficiencies, represents a significant sector of Venezuelan society—those who have felt underrepresented, scorned, and ignored by the preexisting political system. Even if Chavez goes tomorrow, these people will still be on the ground. The opposition must maintain some hope that post-Chavez Venezuela includes them as well. For its part, it is up to the international community to remind all the interested parties of what a democracy really is and to warn them of the consequences if true democratic dialogue is not

established. Let us hope that both sides take heed before it is too late.

About the Author

Miguel Diaz directs the CSIS South America Project, which focuses on advising U.S. policymakers and the private sector on political and economic developments primarily through the U.S.-Mercosur Study Group (a bipartisan group in the U.S. Congress). The project also provides briefings for the Washington policy community and private sector. Diaz brings nearly 10 years of investment banking experience to CSIS, having worked most recently as the senior Latin American economist/strategist for Nikko Securities Inc. in New York City. In the early 1990s, Diaz worked as an economist for the Central Intelligence Agency and as a strategic market analyst for Eaton Corporation. Diaz has worked as a consultant and journalist, and remains a regular columnist for the *Economist Intelligence Unit* and other publications focusing on Latin American financial issues. He holds an M.A. degree in Latin American studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a B.A. degree in political science from Hobart College. Born and raised in New York City, Diaz has also lived in Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico.

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