Opposition in Bolivarian Venezuela: Caught Between Conflict and Compromise

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BARRY CANNON, APR 8 2014

The recent unrest in Venezuela, aimed ultimately at unseating current President Nicolás Maduro, has turned the spotlight on opposition in the country. Such attention has been a rare occurrence, including in academic circles, despite many high profile attempts to dislodge 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. It is especially surprising as the recent violence seems to be a return to those previous extra-constitutional strategies after what seemed to be a long period of constitutionalism, whereby, since 2006, the opposition concentrated on a process of "partidization" through the MUD (*Mesa de Unidad Democratica*/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. Additionally, the return to extra-constitutional strategies is particularly puzzling, considering that the latter electoral strategy resulted in an electoral momentum in favour of the opposition, despite important losses, not least the October 7, 2012, presidential elections against an ailing Chávez. Moreover, the President's premature death on March 5, 2013, and the wafer-thin opposition loss in the ensuing April 15 "special" elections against Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's successor, seemed to have bolstered that momentum further.

What can explain this return to the predominance of extra-institutionalist strategies by the Venezuelan opposition? This article suggests that, rather than viewing these differing strategies as distinct, they should be considered as dialectical, with one responding to the other depending on their outcomes. On this basis, while the Venezuelan opposition has undergone important changes in an institutionalist direction in its composition, discursive emphasis, and strategic direction, on closer inspection these also reveal continuity with previous rupturist and extra-institutional tendencies. Both strategies therefore need to be considered together in order to achieve a fuller, more comprehensive vision of the Venezuelan opposition. Such a wider view allows us to identify its main characteristics, discourse, and strategic directions more clearly. In this way, we can build up this fuller picture and so help us understand better the apparent contradictory impulses within opposition forces in Bolivarian Venezuela today.

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, 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) the non-parliamentary elements dominated, with business groups, trade unions, the media, and parts of the military all playing a leading role, and with 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 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 and with sometimes violent outcomes, in support of opposition television channels and "free speech," and more recently 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.

Opposition Discourse: Rupture and Continuity

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.

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 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, with, 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 (*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, jobs, or both.

Overall, then, these opposition policy proposals could be summarized in development terms as a neoliberal project with a "pro-poor" emphasis, similar to Post-Washington Consensus style policy formulations, as opposed to a "shock therapy" style of neoliberal adjustment as advocated by more radical elements within the MUD coalition (see Payne and Phillips 2010: Chapter 4). This ideological underpinning of opposition policy proposals was, however, comprehensively denied in interviews by leading political personalities within the MUD, from each of the main tendencies (centre-left, centre-right, and right), who consistently styled it as pragmatic and non-ideological. Moreover, policy documentation also contains proposals to naturalize this ideological intention as "common sense", with declared intentions to "depoliticize" large swathes of the state apparatus. How this would be done remains unexplained, but some evidence points to possible purges of PSUV personnel in those instances, and to inculcate liberal values among Venezuelan schoolchildren through the state school system.

Additionally, in interviews different actors expressed varying policy on key issues such as 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 those who would still prefer "shock therapy" over gradual economic liberalisation among opposition groups.

Overall, this brief review of policy further reveals a dialectic between "moderate" and "radical" strategies in opposition policy discourse, which seeks to satisfy both opposition and non-opposition supporters. Assurances of the installation of liberal democracy and "professionalization" of social policy with possible returns of opposition-linked sectors to stewardship of the main bureaucracies (including PDVSA) satisfy key demands for middle and upper class groups. Meanwhile, these proposals, and those promising wider macroeconomic restructuring and geopolitical realignment, would also help satisfy demands from the opposition's principal international sponsor, the United States. On the other hand, promises to maintain the popular Missions (Young and Franco 2013) and to keep PDVSA in state hands will help gain legitimacy from *ni-ni's* and disillusioned government supporters, increasing the opposition's electoral chances.

Strategic Direction: Constitutional and Extra-Constitutional Tactics

The need to maintain current support while attracting support from outside core supporters can, perhaps, also help to explain changes in strategic tactics. 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, 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 and the international media (Buxton 2014).

In sum, following Brack and Weinblum (2009), 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. Electoral strategies can also lose legitimacy if they are not successful, and as we have seen, there are more radical elements within the opposition, both domestic and international, still pressing for strategic radicalization which goes beyond the electoral. Furthermore, they may fit into a wider regional strategy on the part of the right, backed by radical elements in the United States' institutional apparatus (Romano and Delgado Ramos 2012). Promises of widespread privatizations and increased market dominance go some way to assuage these sectors, but they also give them the opportunity to press for more strategic advantage.

Conclusion: Broader Categories, More Accurate Analysis

While this article concentrates on the Venezuelan case, it also throws light on how we should view opposition in other countries, including outside Latin America. It highlights two main points in terms of opposition characterization, and discourse and strategies, respectively. In terms of characterization, it illustrates 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). Roles and salience of the distinct actors may face adjustment 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.

In terms of discourse and strategies, the Venezuelan case shows that these 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.

In these ways, Venezuela 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. Eaton (2013), for example, points to the importance of social mobilization in successful opposition strategies in support of decentralisation in Bolivia. Fairfield (2011) points to the importance of business protest in opposition politics in Argentina against President Cristina Fernandéz, using the 2008 agricultural producers' protests as a case study. Protests in Chile among students from 2006 onwards (Jara Reyes 2012), and in Brazil in 2013 against the Workers' Party government led by Dilma Rousseff (Saad Filho 2013) again 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.

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[†] Interviews were with Roberto Abdul, Director of Sumaté; 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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