

Venezuela Needs Dialogue and Negotiation to Avoid Civil War; Not Trump-Supported “Regime Change”

Written by Joan Russow

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This column was written for Tribune News Services, in response to the question, "Should the United States support regime change in Venezuela?" It was distributed by the Tribune Content Agency on July 19, 2017, and published by the Sacramento Bee and other newspapers.

The question of what role Washington should play in Venezuela's crisis is a simple one, given its recent history. The answer is the same as it would be with regard to the role we would want the Russian government to play in US politics and elections: none at all.

The United States in Venezuelan internal affairs in the 21st century has dwarfed anything that anyone has ever accused Vladimir Putin of doing here. According to the US State Department

Washington "provided training, institution building, and other support to individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved" in the 2002 military coup. Since the coup, Washington has given tens of millions of dollars to the Venezuelan opposition.

In 2013, when the opposition initiated violent protests to overturn the results of a democratic election, Washington supported the protesters. The same was true in 2014.

Today, Florida Senator Marco Rubio openly threatens governments including the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Haiti with punishment if they do not cooperate with Washington's abuse of the Organization of American States to delegitimize the government of Venezuela. And the Trump administration is threatening more severe economic sanctions against Venezuela, which will only worsen shortages of food and medicine there.

Overall, Washington has pretty consistently played a role that has increased political polarization in Venezuela and continues to do so. For most of the past 15 years, Venezuela has been one of Washington's top two (along with Iran and Iraq) targets for regime change.

It is reasonable to assume that the Trump administration which takes counsel from extremist elements like Marco Rubio is likely to be even more reckless.

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This is particularly dangerous because Venezuela remains a polarized country. President Nicolás Maduro's approval rating has been about 21 percent over the past year, but other numbers show much more division. A recent poll from the most-cited pro-opposition pollster, Datanalisis, shows 51 percent supporting the protests, with 44 percent against. Some 55 percent continue to approve of the late president Hugo Chávez, which reflects the decade of economic and social progress that the country had before it fell into recession in 2014, and slid into its current state of depression and economic crisis.

Despite the current crisis, there are millions of Venezuelans, especially those associated with the government or governing party, who have reason to fear an opposition takeover. After the 2002 coup, government officials were detained and dozens of people were killed within the first 36 hours of the short-lived opposition government. Opposition leaders today have almost never denounced violence by their supporters, which has taken many lives during the current wave of protests.

Because of this political polarization, Venezuela needs a negotiated solution that provides credible, constitutional guarantees that whichever side loses the next election will not be politically persecuted by a party that controls all three branches of government.

International mediation can help, as was shown by the release of opposition leader Leopoldo López from prison to house arrest last week; former Spanish prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero played a constructive role. But the mediators must be nonpartisan, which rules out the OAS so long as it is dominated by the Trump administration.

*There is a real risk that Venezuela's current political polarization and violence could escalate into civil war. Those who are familiar with the tragedies of the Washington-fueled civil wars of the 1980s in Central America, which took hundreds of thousands of mostly innocent lives, must take this threat seriously — especially since the Trump administration could possibly block or sabotage a negotiated solution if it appears within reach. - Mark Weisbrod of the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, DC and president of Just Foreign Policy. He is also the author of the book *Failed: What the "Experts" Got Wrong About the Global Economy* (Oxford University Press, 2015).*

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