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'Civil war is possible'

Left-wing intellectual Edgardo Lander on the political crisis in Venezuela, the role of the US and the left's failure to learn

Read this interview in German.

Venezuela is in a dangerous situation, the ditches between the two camps quite deep. How did it comes to this?

We have a confrontation between two sides that are playing a zero-sum game in which they assume they can defeat their enemy. That's war logic. And it's a very dangerous logic.

When Guaidó proclaimed himself as interim president with the backing of the United States and the Lima-group, he thought that Maduro was quite weak, that it just required a final push to get rid of him.

But Maduro still has many strengths. He has control of most of the state structures. And most importantly he has the backing of the military. And something that's not usually seen from outside of Venezuela is the fact that Maduro still has some real popular backing.

How strong is this support? And how can you explain it considering the disastrous economic and social situation?

The government has the support of about 20 per cent of the population, that's millions of Venezuelans, literally millions. Many things happened in Venezuela during the first decade of the government of Hugo Chávez. There were enormous transformations in peoples' living standards, elimination of poverty, access to education, free health services, reduction of poverty. All social indicators went up and up and up through those years.

But apart from that, there were some really significant transformations in the political culture of the popular strata in Venezuelan society. There was a sense of dignity, a sense of being able to decide peoples' future by themselves. Millions of people

participated. It changed peoples' lives. The right likes to ignore this. And if you ignore this, you are ignoring part of Venezuelan history, Venezuela as it is today.

Are there other factors? For example, the distribution of food?

Yes. There are also distributive policies, like the distribution of subsidised food. But if you think that's the only reason why people support the government, it's a real insult to people. It's not recognising people as agents, as having their own will. And that's racist sometimes. You know, it's a very class-based perspective of Venezuelan society, and that's not what Venezuela is like today.

How important are the sanctions of the US government?

The most important issue is US policy and regime change. And the US government has announced again and again that, no matter what, there will be regime change in Venezuela, and all the options are on the table. They're having this boycott of the Venezuelan economy, in financial terms and in terms of a trade blockade. It makes it extremely difficult for the Venezuelan government to respond to the current crisis.

Of course, the crisis does date back at least three or four years. But that doesn't mean that the measures by the US government are insignificant. And if there's no lifting of the sanctions, there's no possibility for recovery of Venezuelan society.

How strong is the government of Nicolás Maduro?

Well, we have a government that's incapable of governing the country. It's extremely weak in financial, administrative and organisational terms.

I mean, the one figure that raises my greatest concern is that, according to some studies, the life expectancy of Venezuelans is dropping. It shows how deep the crisis really is.

Now, more than 10 per cent of the population has left the country basically for political, economic and social reasons. People don't see a future, they want to take their kids away, so they have a possibility of a better future someplace else.

Is there still hope for a peaceful solution?

We have a situation where, as long as both sides assume that they can defeat the other side and they're strong enough to survive this confrontation, there's obviously no willingness to even open up the

possibility of some agreement or negotiation. The United States are pressing Guaidó to refuse negotiation, so he repeats that over and over. And there are factors on both sides that denounce any possibility of negotiation.

But what happens if this continues for a few more weeks? What happens if the rest of the opposition who don't belong to the Guaidó party realise that he's leading them to a dead end? And that it's not going anywhere and there's no possibility of getting rid of Maduro like that?

What happens when some parts of the government realise that the government can't survive the sanctions, can't survive this collapse, can't survive the fact that the majority of the population reject the government? There's bound to be some recognition by some people on both sides that there's a need for another way out. Or maybe that's just wishful thinking.

Do you still see hope in the face of recent confrontations?

I like to think that it's never too late. We have had experiences in different parts of the world where people that have been killing each other eventually manage to get some sort of agreement. I mean, the negotiations in Northern Ireland, the negotiations in South Africa. But if you ask me what are the probabilities, I would say that civil war is possible.

If both sides refuse to recognise the other side and they decide to just fight it out, or the United States continue the military threat, or Guaidó continues asking the US to intervene militarily, or the government just continues repressing us as it is doing right now.

Venezuelan society today is marked by uncertainty, by fear, by seeing others as enemies.

This means that it will take a long time to reconcile the different parts of society, doesn't it? In Europe, we often speak about the need for fresh and clean elections in Venezuela – and then the problem will be solved more or less.

Yes, the idea of elections as some magic wand. That's fantasy, it's got nothing to do with reality. We have to confront the fact that it's a deeply divided society. We have to confront the fact that people don't trust each other; that people fear each other.

But as I said before, if people on both sides manage not to succumb to this pressure or the extremes and are willing to talk, then things could change. It's important for Venezuela to have a sense that there's light at the end of the tunnel.

You mentioned the threats by the Trump government. Do you think intervention is a real possibility or is it mere rhetoric?

It does a lot of damage whether it's true or not. There's no doubt that the United States is doing an incredible amount of harm to Venezuela today with economic sanctions. Venezuela is highly dependent on oil exports. 96 or 98 per cent of exports are oil. And the United States has been traditionally the main market, and it has been the source of the inputs Venezuela required for its oil industry. That has been completely blocked from one day to another.

The alternatives are extremely difficult and expensive. India offered to buy some of the oil that was previously going to the United States. There was so much pressure by the US government against the Indian government that they stepped back. So Venezuela has no access to international credit, it can't even refinance its foreign debt. The banks are afraid even if they aren't American banks.

So it's obvious that the United States are not just making statements or whatever, but its government is committed to get rid of Maduro.

What share of Venezuela's problems are home-made and how much is it due to the interference of geopolitical actors?

Unfortunately Venezuela, in part because of its oil resources, has become a place for geopolitical confrontation, between the United States on one hand and Russia and China on the other. So, the fact that there has been this move towards the right in Argentina, Brazil et cetera has led the United States to say, well, this is our chance now to really get rid of this. So, Venezuela is a place in Latin America where the geopolitical confrontation between China, Russia and the United States has been played out. And that also makes it quite difficult to start negotiations.

A few weeks ago there were talks between the US and Russia about the crisis in Venezuela. You think they'll come to terms?

It's very hard to imagine. And besides, at the same time this is about Venezuela, this is our country, how can those two go to Rome and discuss our future?

And are the United States going to lose patience with Guaidó? Everything Guaidó tried did not work. You think the United States administration is already considering alternatives?

I doubt that they could find a better alternative than Guaidó, because they would need someone that had popular backing. And nobody is going to get the backing that Guaidó currently has. Guaidó was sort of

a magician's act, where a rabbit was taken out of a hat. The opposition has been fragmented, there has been competition among the leadership. I mean who's the leader of the opposition? And who's going to be the presidential candidate? And there's been some important distrust around different parties. Guaidó was not part of that. And so, he comes as an outsider.

So you think they will stick to him because there's no alternative?

Yes. I find it difficult to believe that they could find anybody to replace him. And it's unlikely that they will be willing to proceed with the intervention without some sort of organised support.

What about the Europeans? They are active in the international contact group and now some of the Latin American countries are trying to become a member of this group as well. Is there any chance that they might really help to find a solution – or is this a dead end as well?

I have severe doubts. And it's basically because the European Union has shown to be unwilling to confront the United States and its policy towards Venezuela. As soon as Guaidó proclaimed himself interim president and the Lima-Group decided to recognise him as president, the United States put a lot of pressure on the European countries to recognise him.

So, you have a situation where the European Union wants to play a role in promoting some sort of negotiation. But if the European Union is the expression of the European countries that all recognise Guaidó, they're very unlikely to get legitimacy. And it's very unlikely that the Maduro government will accept them as honest brokers.

The European Union has a great responsibility because I think it actively, I don't know if completely consciously, sabotaged the Montevideo initiative. The Montevideo initiative was an initiative by the presidents of Uruguay and Mexico. And they had a significant possibility of having some impact. They were leftist governments but not the sort of radical left that identifies with Maduro in any way. And there was a chance. Both leaders are highly respected in Latin America.

What about the Latin American left? It seems a lot of damage was caused by the nearly unconditional support of Latin America's left for the Maduro government. They are really suffering now, because it's always used as an argument against them in every election campaign. How long will it take to recover from that?

Maybe a long time, maybe they will never recover. I think that the left in general, but the Latin American left in particular, seems to lack the capacity of self-reflection and self-criticism, and the willingness to try to learn from experience. Things are repeated over and over and over and there's always some condition of solidarity with our leftist brothers. So, this is contributing to make socialism a bad word in Venezuela.

And in Latin America right now.

Yes. In Latin America today nobody wants socialism, socialism is an authoritarian government. Repressive, authoritarian, corrupt, they're killing possibilities. They're contributing to killing even the idea of anti-capitalist struggles, because it's associated with this sort of thing.

I think that history is repeating itself. I think that what we're facing in Latin America is the same situation that we had in Europe during Stalinism, when a good part of the European left and European intellectuals refused to speak out and even recognise what was going on.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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