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Venezuela's tipping point

Michael Langer reports from Caracas about the political crisis in the country — and the chances for a peaceful resolution

Read this interview in German.

Following Nicolás Maduro's re-election, the leader of the National Assembly Juan Guaidó has also declared himself President of Venezuela. Who is Juan Guaidó and how did we get to this point?

On 10 January 2019, eight months after his controversial election as President, Maduro took the oath of office before the Constitutional Court for a period of one term. However, like the result of the election itself, his assumption of office was not recognised by either the opposition or by many Western states, as the voting conditions and the disadvantages faced by opposition politicians had made it too unequal. Guaidó, the incumbent leader of parliament, then declared that parliament — called the National Assembly in Venezuela — would assume all executive functions and called for nationwide demonstrations on 23 January.

When hundreds of thousands took to the streets, even in rural areas, something happened that many had been expecting, that US vice president Mike Pence had called for, but that quite a few also feared: at a major rally in Caracas, Guaidó proclaimed himself President of Venezuela. Although this approach was not agreed with major opposition parties, it caused an outbreak of great euphoria. For too long, political frustration and socioeconomic crisis had shaped the minds of the population. And then a young, charismatic politician from the 'Voluntad Popular' party of imprisoned opposition leader Leopoldo López comes along, promising change for the better. If he had previously been known to insiders mostly for his role as a former student leader and coordinator of his party, this announcement now saw him stepping onto the global political stage.

How does Guaidó justify proclaiming himself President? Does he have enough support amongst the general population and the opposition

parties?

There are arguments for taking over executive functions in Article 233 of the Constitution. In the event of a power vacuum caused by an 'absolute error' on part of the President, this article places a duty upon Parliament to hold new elections within 30 days and to take over the presidency for the interim period. Previously, Parliament had declared that President Maduro had 'left office.' The Supreme Court retaliated by ruling that all decisions taken by Parliament were invalid, due to 'disregard for legal processes'.

However, broad sections of the population appear indifferent to legal nuances or doubts about legal justifications: they want a regime change and have little confidence in courts, electoral authorities or security forces — all these institutions are staffed by government supporters. There have already been numerous protests in recent months against the current social situation, the inadequate water supply or food shortages. An inflation rate of 1.7 million per cent and a massive wave of migration to neighbouring countries are the visible consequences of enormous political failure.

On the evening of 23 January, however, the protests degenerated into street fighting and looting, with 16 dead and many injured, feeding fears of a chaotic disintegration of the state. It remains to be seen if the rescue plan ('Plan País') prepared by the opposition alliance 'Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre' can provide the cure, especially as it would require an effective transitional government with real powers and clear agreements between political actors and state institutions.

How are Nicolás Maduro, the *Chavista* movement and their military allies reacting to this escalation of events?

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) had also called for rallies, but Maduro's and the *Chavistas*' uncertainty could be seen in his televised address. He spoke about the court, the prosecution and the armed forces who would put Guaidó and the 'putschists' back in their place. In fact, attempts were made as early as the afternoon of 23 January to suppress many protests by deploying the National Guard or counter-terrorist commandos. We can expect that a repressive crackdown on protests is planned for the coming weeks. And here we see the Achilles heel of the opposition strategy: for an effective takeover of executive power, the support of the military is required. And despite widespread dissatisfaction among troops, this is no easy task.

The military has many functions in the Venezuelan state, including economic ones, from the distribution of food to the management of state-owned companies, such as the oil company PdVSA. A

reorganisation of this mix of political and economic interests would also need to include internal structures and hierarchies, so that the security forces could be integrated in the transition process envisaged by Guaidó. The statements made by defence minister Padrino López in support of Maduro may have come late, but they were clear enough to distance himself from the opposition's cause.

The US and many Latin American governments have already recognised Guaidó as President of Venezuela. Maduro immediately broke off diplomatic relations with the US in response. How can the international community contribute to the solution?

Guaidó's rapid recognition by the US and the major Latin American countries definitively raised the Venezuelan problem to an international, or even global level. Maduro's reaction, the breaking of diplomatic ties and the expulsion of diplomats, received a prompt reply from the US government, who do not respect any such expulsion as they refuse to recognise Maduro. Moreover, they strongly emphasised their options for safeguarding own security interests, which can be interpreted on a scale from (economic) sanctions to direct (military) intervention.

This in turn provoked a quick response from Russia. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov urged the US to exercise restraint and offered his support to Maduro, with China's government also declaring its solidarity. This clearly shows how Venezuela, with its immense wealth of natural resources, can become a point of conflict for global, political and economic interests. An intervention by the US would have consequences for the entire region. Therefore, the countries who take a neutral position or do not want to express a definite opinion on the presidential question are all the more important: among them are Uruguay and Mexico.

Would the replacement of Maduro provide the conditions for ending the long-standing political and economic crisis?

It's a mistake not only of the opposition, but also of the now heavily involved international community, to equate the end of the state crisis with the replacement of Maduro. This is not about one single person, but rather a social model that failed because of its claim — eventually corrupted by self-interest — to realise socialist ideals. It was thus Venezuela's example which quickly mutated from a role model to a clichéd deterrent against the adoption of progressive policies in Latin America.

It's clear that in addition to a rational economic and development policy, the country also needs ideas for the establishment of civic

peace, for the inclusion of polarised political forces and, in particular, for the restoration of state authority and institutions. Chavism, too, needs a political future, and certainly not as a new guerrilla group. Establishing a 'humanitarian channel' or countering the economic crisis may well be the most pressing issues, but even the creation of suitable conditions for free and fair elections will require negotiation, processes of communication and institutional reorganisation.

The potential risk of external interventions in a partly anarchically structured state with competing interest groups should not be underestimated. A mediating body with international support would therefore have enough challenges to overcome.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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