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A crisis of historic proportions

Michael Langer in Caracas on the situation following the attempted assassination of President Maduro

Read this interview in German.

Nicolás Maduro, President of Venezuela, has survived what appeared to be a drone assassination attempt at a parade of the national guards on 4 August 2018. What happened and how can it be explained?

Until the live broadcast on state television was interrupted, you could actually see how the President had to be protected from what was clearly an airborne threat; you could also follow how the parade of the national guards dispersed in panic. Beyond that, however, little else was visible. Everything else you hear is from communiqués or tweets. The government released a statement saying that it was a drone attack which left the President unharmed but injured seven soldiers; Maduro pointed the finger of blame at 'right-wing extremists', singling out the Columbian president Juan Manuel Santos and threatening draconian punishment for the perpetrators.

At the same time, a self-styled 'Venezuelan investigative journalist', Patricia Poleo, based in Miami, read out a statement by a thus far unknown group called *Soldados de Franelas* claiming responsibility for the attack and saying it was 'fighting for democracy'. Of course, social media is now awash with speculation about fake news, shadowy figures in the background, supporters of the plot and those behind it. There's a Latin American proverb – '*Si el río suena, piedras trae*' – which translates as 'If you can hear the river, it's moving stones.' Or, as you would say in English: there's no smoke without fire.

Maduro accusing Colombia of being behind the attack is incendiary though, isn't it?

Those of us who have been in Venezuela for some time have grown used to a coarse tone in official statements, but this kind of accusation needs proof to back it up. We'll have to see how Colombia responds – and whether the already complicated bilateral relations between the

two neighbours get any worse, or whether this is taken as an opportunity to start constructive dialogue again. The two countries share a border over 1250 miles in length, some of it in highly inaccessible forest terrain; there is a lively smuggling trade back and forth across the frontier in which everything from food and petrol through to precious minerals and weapons or drugs is bought and sold. In the border regions especially, both states are quite absent, and semi-legal or criminal organisations, rebel groups, and drug cartels have set up parallel structures. That makes it difficult to say to what extent there was international support for the attack. Whatever the case, both countries have no shortage of pressing topics: the socio-economic disaster in Venezuela has led to a wave of emigration, much of which is passing through the border city of Cúcuta.

Are the any chances at all that the economic crisis will be dealt with? The IMF is forecasting a frankly terrifying one-million-per-cent rate of inflation for 2018.

The crisis has indeed reached historic proportions: the economy is contracting for the fifth year running and public services have all but broken down; supplies of everything from medicine to agricultural and industrial materials have slowed to a trickle. Around one third of the population is now receiving state rations (known as 'CLAP packs') via an electronic ration book ('*carnet de la patria*').

In the last week of July, Maduro announced a tentative change of direction in economic policy, with a currency reform intended to breathe new life into the flagging *Bolívar Fuerte* (strong Bolívar) by knocking five zeros off of prices and renaming it the *Bolívar Soberano* (Sovereign Bolívar); moreover, access to foreign currency for imports and remittances from Venezuelans living abroad is going to be made easier. Prices for petrol – which is currently distributed for next to nothing – and for public transport (currently free) are going to be increased, too. Yet the price rises are particularly delicate, as previous attempts to implement them have led to violent protests in the population.

So the success of the economic reforms will depend on whether they are backed by supporters and the opposition?

As long as the reforms are limited to specific, isolated measures, they will have only a limited economic and social effect. A Chavism-style adjustment programme would doubtless encounter resistance among Maduro's own supporters: the honeymoon period following his controversial election victory on 20 May 2018 is clearly past, and discussions about the ideals behind Chavism currently ongoing in and

around the ruling *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) shown that the party is split with regards to the way forward.

Opposition parties, too, are split, with some ready to talk and others radically opposed to Maduro's government; all of them doubt the President's version of events and want investigations; most of them are against upping petrol prices, too – all the more so since the plan is to distribute petrol via the state rationing card, a move which critics see as the beginning of a slide into a bureaucratic surveillance state. As such, the coming weeks in Venezuela will continue to offer sources of conflict.



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