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Venezuela’s glimmer of hope

The recent round of negotiations between the Venezuelan government and opposition may actually be able to break the country's political deadlock

This is the third serious attempt to inject some momentum in the negotiations between the Venezuelan government and opposition. Negotiations have been taking place in Mexico since last Friday, with Norway acting as mediator. The failure of the previous attempts at negotiation ended up strengthening Venezuela’s President Nicolas Maduro, who tightened the screws on each occasion. Expectations are correspondingly low this time, especially among the Venezuelan population.

They also have other concerns: Covid-19 has led to hospitals that were already in a desperate state collapsing completely and the vaccination rate of eleven per cent (fully vaccinated) is one of the lowest on the continent, along with Haiti and Nicaragua. The supply of medicines and food is precarious and inflation, power cuts, and petrol shortages add to the already existing problems. More than six million of the 28 million inhabitants have left their country, shrinking the opposition's base. Those left behind struggle to survive and many have withdrawn from political life in disappointment.

Economic handcuffs

According to polls, Maduro's support stands at 21 per cent — which is roughly the number of government employees and military officers directly dependant on the regime. The majority of Venezuelans are in favour of political change. Paradoxically, the opposition proves incapable of capitalising on the societal mood. Little is left of the euphoria when Juan Guaidó proclaimed himself as president in January 2019, making life difficult for ‘the usurper Maduro’ with mass protests, a military mini-rebellion, and broad international recognition. Back then, 80 per cent supported him; today, according to a poll by the Meganalisis Institute, only four per cent of the population still back him.This means that he is no longer a direct threat in Maduro’s eyes. Now the head of state wants

to free himself from the straitjacket that Guaidó and the opposition have put together thanks to their international backing.

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Venezuela is struggling economically. What still functions, apart from the (ailing) oil sector, is a flourishing underground economy consisting of racketeering, gold, arms, human and drug smuggling. Criminal groups from all over the world are involved and control large parts of the country, protected by a network of corrupt military and parastate militias. The productive apparatus lies in ruins and cannot be kickstarted again without foreign investment. But even Maduro's allies like Russia and China are now keeping their wallets closed, despite their geostrategic interest. The Western embargo, which shrunk the country's gross domestic product by 80 per cent, has made doing business with Venezuela more difficult and more expensive. And the rampant corruption makes investments seem like a financial bottomless pit.

All this has recently eroded Maduro's legitimacy. During the last general election in 2020, only 15 to 30 per cent went to the polls. 'This is a sign of weakness and makes Maduro more dependent on alliances with the military and other not necessarily trustworthy partners', says political scientist Colette Capriles.

A change of tides

Maduro's options are therefore limited: Either a flight forward, into ever more authoritarian measures, similar to the development in socialist brother countries such as Nicaragua and Cuba. Or a, at least partial, democratic opening and concessions to ease sanctions, stabilise the economy, and gain legitimacy. Maduro has opted for the latter. In the face of internal resistance, he recently even made half-hearted concessions to the opposition. And two critics of the government now sit on the five-member electoral council. Opposition leader Freddy Guevara was released, and the opposition alliance MUD, which had handed the ruling party PSUV a bitter defeat in the 2016 parliamentary elections, was also admitted to the regional elections in autumn.

While two similarly strong opponents faced off in the last negotiations in 2019, this time, the opposition is in a weaker position. The 38-year-old Guaidó has lost support within the opposition alliance because of his

own mistakes, but also thanks to a clever politics of division, propaganda, and targeted repression by the regime. Moderate opposition leaders such as Henrique Capriles criticised Guaidó's unfortunate entanglements in military adventures such as the failed mercenary invasion in May 2020. Guaidó also made unrealistic demands, such as Maduro's resignation, a condition for negotiations. Capriles' demand for a gradual strategy recently gained support in the business association as well as in the Foro Civico, the most important civil society movement.

Despite its perceived weakness, the opposition also holds some trumps. One is the support of the US and Europe for a return to a democratic rule. Recovering from Trump's ultimately empty military threats, the transatlantic bridge seems to have been repaired. The US has leverage in the form of sanctions. Without the consent of US diplomacy, Maduro will therefore not achieve his goal.

The second trump is timing. The elections in autumn, in which the opposition now wants to take part as one body, offer an unrivalled opportunity to gain power. The cadres of the ruling socialist party PSUV are unpopular. If the opposition succeeds in finding common candidates rooted in the people and in defeating voter apathy, this would be an important step in building a solid base. Admittedly, Maduro controls the campaign machinery, the electoral council, and the entire logistics of the ballot. But if he wants to achieve an easing of sanctions, he will not be able to play these cards openly.

Enhanced experience

The mediators have also learned lessons from the failure of the previous negotiations, keeping the negotiations secret; none of the parties are allowed to leak content to the press. Both sides have agreed to also accept parts of the agreement, provided they have been sufficiently discussed and their implementation is urgent — even if the rest of the agenda is still open. This opens the possibility of humanitarian aid deliveries, a release of all political prisoners or a gradual re-institutionalisation of the country and important key bodies such as the electoral council.

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The talks are being led by the experienced Danish diplomat Dag Nylander, who has already brought the complicated peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas to a happy conclusion. This experience inspired new ideas for negotiation points, such as the right of victims to compensation and the inclusion of civil society

to place an agreement on a broader foundation of legitimacy.

Russia and the Netherlands are acting as observers. Phil Gunson of the International Crisis Group sees the fact that Russia could be brought on board as positive: ‘Up until now, Russia has tried to prevent strategic advantages for the US and its allies. But an agreement that preserves Russia's economic interests in Venezuela would also benefit Moscow’.

The negotiations will neither be easy nor move along at speed. It is also not certain that the opposition can maintain its unity nor is it certain that Maduro will be strong enough to push through substantial concessions vis-à-vishis allies, especially in regards to those who are entangled in organised crime and have little interest in a solution. Another player in the shadows is Cuba. The Caribbean Island is in the midst of its worst economic and legitimacy crisis since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1990s. The deals with Venezuela are one of the last life boats. The Cubans have enormous influence on Maduro and will therefore sit indirectly at the negotiating table.

Nevertheless, there is justified hope. If the last negotiations in 2019 were about ‘all or nothing’, this time politics has returned to the negotiating table as the art of compromise and moderation. The possibility of a transitional government in which both camps share power is at least on the horizon, albeit still a very distant one.



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