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Venezuela's dual power situation

Venezuela now has two parliamentary presidents and a divided opposition. What does this mean for the upcoming elections?

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For all the Venezuelan crisis has receded into the background lately, there's still no immediate prospect of a resolution to the country's lasting impasse — as the events during last week's election of a new parliamentary president amply demonstrate. It wasn't just Juan Guaidó who staked a claim to head that office, for instance, but fellow opposition politician Luis Parra. So there are now two parliamentary presidents who hold competing sessions. In a way, this development is the logical consequence of Venezuelan politics' long-standing structural tendency to reflect its complete lack of ability to reach consensus by creating dual institutions and parallel structures: this preference for tactical one-upmanship has now taken hold of the National Assembly.

When parliamentary president Guaidó had himself proclaimed 'interim president' back in January 2019, it seemed as if this step had boxed Nicolás Maduro's Chavist government into a corner. Yet Guaidó failed to capitalise on the momentum he generated and present a practicable strategy for a process of transition to democracy. More broadly, the opposition remained unable to integrate important political elements such as Chavist dissidents. Furthermore, the anti-Maduro movement did not manage to secure the support of the Venezuelan military, misreading the real conditions for its ambitions.

Increasingly, the disillusioned population began to ignore the Guaidó team's calls to protest and, in September, negotiations under Norwegian mediation between the government and the 'G4' group of main opposition parties (Primero Justicia, Acción Democrática, Voluntad Popular, and Un Nuevo Tiempo) collapsed. President Maduro responded by setting up his own 'round-table dialogue' with various smaller opposition parties.

Two parliamentary presidents

Now Luis Parra, with 81 votes (from a total of 167 deputies), has had himself elected parliamentary president — despite the fact that he no longer has the backing of his own party, Primero Justicia, following accusations of corruption. His support came from other opposition dissidents and from the Chavist parties in parliament. And it's not just the fact that attendance lists for the parliamentary session during which he was elected have gone missing that has led to questions about the circumstances of the vote. To add to the chaos, the police tried to prevent several deputies from entering the National Assembly in a decidedly forceful fashion. In the session organised by Guaidó two hours later, a roll-call vote reinstated him as parliamentary president with 100 votes, meaning that there must have been double voting from regular deputies and from their representatives.

Meanwhile, police repression against elected parliamentarians and their president has, for now, led to renewed solidarity between the various opposition groups. Yet it's doubtful whether this is sufficient for the splintered anti-Chavez movement to develop a joint strategy. Moreover, if — as in the second week of January — Guaidó and Parra hold competing parliamentary sessions, it will fall to the loyalist Supreme Court to decide which sessions are to be considered legitimate meetings of the National Assembly.

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All this comes at a time in which crucial decisions have to be taken — not least on who will sit on the national electoral council, as parliamentary elections are planned for 2020. It would seem unlikely that all of the opposition parties — or at least all of their candidates and not just the respective dissidents — will be authorised to participate. The government is already pressing for a ballot to be held soon, sensing that it has a good chance of grinding down the opposition's final stronghold, the National Assembly.

After all, despite the dramatic recession, the hyperinflation and the social crisis, despite the fact that more than four million Venezuelans have emigrated, the government has demonstrated an astonishing ability to keep a grip on power. By partially removing currency and price controls, the Maduro administration has managed to mitigate the effect of international sanctions. Although oil production has all but ceased, electricity is unstable and petrol is being rationed in several regions, gold

and other raw materials continue to be traded using informal channels. Yet the switch to using US dollars for payment and the more lax import checks have eaten into the margins of traders whose support is crucial in the country's clientelistic development model; should their loyalty weaken, this may even well result in changing the position of the military.

The international players in Venezuela

With the economic crisis and the social crisis, Venezuela is still considered the region's problem with the highest geopolitical significance. Migration to neighbouring Latin American countries and its immense mineral wealth cannot be ignored. As such, the vote of 5 January was closely observed by the country's neighbours and the competing candidates had already secured support from their international allies.

The result is that Maduro is now being accused of having bowed to the wishes of Russia which seeks to reinforce his presidency, legitimise it and increase economic cooperation. In this context, the dubious election of Parra may be understood as an attempted coup that got out of control. Meanwhile, Guaidó can continue to count on the support of the US and the Lima Group within the Organisation of American States (OAS), as well as most EU countries. His re-election had been expected and, regardless of the procedural issues, has been recognised; he also remains the 'legitimate interim president' in the eyes of these states.

Nevertheless, there were notable differences in the way these states reacted to the most recent events. While the US's special Venezuela representative, Elliott Abrams, spoke of a broad range of potential reactions, from increased sanctions through to military intervention (which he talked up by referring to Donald Trump's 'competence' in the Middle East in the wake of his approach there), Mike Pompeo and Trump himself opted for unusually cautious language, urging for parliamentary elections to be held soon and for the government to enter into a real dialogue with the opposition. This position was mirrored by UN General Secretary António Guterres, EU High Representative Josep Borrell and the German Foreign Ministry. Guaidó, however, refused to return to the failed dialogue brokered by the Norwegian delegation.

As such, the upcoming elections to the National Assembly are highly significant. Will the conditions for a fair and free ballot be fulfilled? One key prerequisite will be a neutral electoral council, whose composition is decided by a two-thirds majority and will therefore require dialogue between all parties currently represented in the chamber — i.e. between Guaidó and Parra, between the 'G4' and Chavist parties. Should this

prove to be an insurmountable obstacle, then the case would fall to the Supreme Court — an institution accused by the opposition of being pro-administration. This would represent yet another missed opportunity to start a peaceful, democratic transition in Venezuela.



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