

## **PRESIDENT MADURO ISOLATES HIMSELF DOMESTICALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY AMIDST RISING CIVIL UNREST**

*By Olivia de Fouchier*

Since the beginning of April, Venezuela has been rocked by violent protests that have resulted in the **death of at least 39 people** and the arrests of over 1500 demonstrators and opposition activists. The brutality of the demonstrations and anti-riot police response has **been condemned nationally and internationally**, with experts and politicians calling into question the stability of the country's democracy. Opposition activists are denouncing the **executive and judiciary government branches' overreach**. While Venezuela's unrest is not recent, a decision by the Supreme Court to adopt the National Assembly's jurisdiction in giving President Maduro extended executive powers sparked a wave of dissent throughout the country which has not been subdued by the subsequent reversal the order.

**On March 29:** The Supreme Court announced it was adopting the National Assembly's responsibilities in **authorizing President Maduro to create oil ventures without congressional approval**.

**On March 30:** Anti-government protests erupted in Caracas over the Supreme Court decision to overrule the separation of powers.

**On April 1:** The Supreme Court reversed its order to adopt the National Assembly's jurisdiction.

**On May 1:** President Maduro called for the **creation of a Constituent Assembly** to rewrite the Constitution.

**On May 7:** Opposition leaders boycotted President Maduro's call for participation in the National Constituent Assembly.

A total of **39 people have been killed, 700 injured and 1991 others arrested** in anti or pro-government violence since the beginning of April. In addition **14 journalists were reportedly arrested** and another **106 assaulted**. On May 8, the government announced that 75 of the people arrested would face military tribunals despite their civilian status. On May 12, **65 soldiers were arrested for "treason" and "instigation of rebellion"** because of their criticism of the repression against protesters. They were not given the opportunity to contact attorneys or to face trial.

Attorney General Luisa Ortega condemned the arrests and police violence and said that it was being used as an **“arm of political action.”**

The Supreme Court’s decision to virtually impeach the National Assembly’s jurisdiction stems the executive’s attempt to maintain legislative control despite the 2015 Parliamentary election in which opposition MPs from the **Democratic Unity Roundtable coalition (MUD) obtained a ruling majority** (112 seats, 56.22%). The Court and the President’s attempt to limit their power is not new. In August 2016, President Maduro announced that he wanted **the block the National Assembly’s access to public funds** because it was “operating outside the law.” He said that Parliamentary leadership was “in contempt of previous Supreme Court rulings” and was therefore illegitimate.” In addition, several **MPs had their passports annulled** in order to prevent them from attending international conferences and all **MP wages were suspended** because of budget cuts. On April 7, opposition leader **Henrique Capriles, the President of the MUD was banned by President Maduro from any public office for 15 years**, preventing him from contending against Maduro in the 2018 Presidential Elections.

President Maduro’s decision to create a Constituent Assembly to modify the Constitution fueled further protests and confirmed his desire to sideline the opposition-led National Assembly. The new government body would be composed of 500 members of which only half at maximum would be elected. It would have the power to **dissolve the National Assembly, name a new electoral council, and dismiss governors and mayors.** The President said that a new constitution would “neutralize” opposition activists and prevent a “coup.” In response to Maduro’s calling of this council, Capriles called for further protests and led his party to the boycott of any meetings they were invited to in connection to this Constituent Assembly process. He warned that if President Maduro did not repeal his order, **Venezuela would be “ungovernable”** and that there would be “two constitutions.” National Assembly leader Julio Borges added that it “was a scam to deceive the Venezuelan people with a mechanism that is nothing more than a tightening of the coup in Venezuela.”

President Maduro’s popularity has dropped significantly. The latest polls show that **only 22% of Venezuelans approve** of him. Anti-government protesters are calling on the Chavista administration **“to adopt concrete, concerted measures with the opposition in order to ensure the effective separation of powers, respect for the rule of law, human rights, and respect for institutions.”** They are also asking for the removal from office of the Supreme Court judges who issued the March 29 ruling and for **anticipated elections in 2017**, hoping that if held, they will remove President Maduro from power. This demand was denied, and Vice President Disodado Cabello said that “Nicolas would not leave, nor would the right-wing party govern the country anytime soon.” Activists also request the reopening of humanitarian aid routes for food and medication to enter the country in response to the severe shortages taking place.

Venezuela's position within the international community is also becoming increasingly precarious. Foreign leaders asked that Venezuela **free its political prisoners (approximately 100), restore legislative and oversight functions of the National Assembly, reinstall the independence of the Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council, call elections, and allow humanitarian aid to enter the country.** In the United States, the Department of State said the attempt by the Supreme Court to take over National Assembly's responsibilities was a "**serious setback for democracy in Venezuela.**" The European Union also condemned Maduro's actions and asked for a "**clear electoral calendar.**" The MERCOSUR (Mercado Comun del Sur) commercial block, which had already **suspended Venezuela's membership for failure to comply to its democratic standards,** called upon the accord's democracy clause, the Ushuaia protocol, on April 1, threatening the country of expulsion from the group if concrete measures were not taken. Leaders of Mexico, Spain, the United States, and Brazil criticized President Maduro and said that any constitutional changes would require a national referendum. Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said that the calling of a Constituent Assembly was "**not the security exit for the crisis**" and that the only solution would be to organize a presidential election. Citizens in Spain, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Turkey, Italy and Hong Kong have assembled in support of Venezuelan opposition protesters.

On April 3, the Organization of American States (OAS) passed a resolution declaring that there was a "**breakdown of constitutional order in Venezuela.**" Secretary General Luis Almagro said that Maduro's actions were "illegal." On April 26, Maduro announced that it was **withdrawing from the OAS.** This diplomatic move was a response to the decision taken the same day by the OAS to hold a meeting with several foreign ministers to evaluate the upheaval in Venezuela. Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez justified the decision saying that the "OAS and conservative regional governments were trying to topple" President Maduro. The President had already accused the protests of being a "**Washington-inspired plot to put a stop to their socialist revolution**" and that he was being targeted by a "right-wing regional pact." The Vice President of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) Diosdado Cabello supported President Maduro's decision, saying that the OAS was an "**instrument of imperialism.**"

Venezuela's removal from the OAS should not have a large impact on its economy or its functioning. Indeed, Venezuela's economy is already struggling and the process of withdrawal from the OAS will take at least 2 years. In the meantime, experts say the **OAS will maintain the ability to promote and consolidate democracy in Venezuela and seek the "solution of political, juridical and economic problems that may arise."** In addition, historic trends show that despite tensions between the United States and Venezuela, the oil and fuel trade between both nations has not been disrupted. Still, there is a risk that the country's removal will further sink its recession, as it triggers Venezuela's debt payment toward the OAS before being legally allowed to withdrawal, a debt that currently amounts to \$8.7 million.

**Cuba** is one of the only countries to overtly support Maduro's actions. Raul Castro said that the OAS had an “**interventionist, illegal and pro-imperialist**” attitude toward the Venezuela. Certain socialist groups and work unions around the world have also expressed their support but opposition to the quasi-dictatorial leadership remains more important.

Venezuela's situation will most likely **not stabilize in the near future**. The violent protests are inherently a result of the current state of Venezuela's economy. The nation, which heavily relies on oil exports, was severely hit during the early 2016 oil crisis. **Crude oil production declined by 9% in 2016 and already by 8% in 2017**. The collapse in oil prices also caused the country's revenues to decline sharply, creating **shortages in food, medicine and basic goods**. Nearly 80% of the population struggles to meet the medically required calorie intake per day. This crisis has been accentuated by Venezuela's debt payment deadline for **a \$2 billion bond which was due on April 12** by the state oil company PdVSA (Petroleos de Venezuela). In order to be solvent, PdVSA has been trying to sell stakes in oil fields to foreign nations, namely Russia and China, an attempt that could be compromised by civil unrest.

The government is making attempts to **control the key institutions of state power, including the security apparatus and the PdVSA** which largely finances the government's ability to operate. The opposition will continue to apply pressure but they risk increased oppression by President Maduro both through arrests and through political exiles as was the case for opposition leader Capriles. The opposition's current **lack of leadership** will most likely delay any successful attempt at confronting President Maduro. International action could be necessary, whether from the part of financial and diplomatic institutions or with the manipulation of aid by foreign governments, in order to improve the situation if a replacement for Capriles is not found soon. Neither Maduro and his supporters nor the opposition seem to be willing to make compromises, locking the country in an **escalating insecurity**.

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