

Global Issues

Explanations for the Current Crisis in Venezuela: A Clash of Paradigms and Narratives

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Various developments at the outset of Nicolás Maduro's presidency set the stage for what has been called a "humanitarian crisis", consisting of hyperinflation, a sharp decline in national income, massive emigration, and acute political conflict and disorder. When Hugo Chávez went off to Cuba for the last time to seek cancer treatment in late 2012, Maduro as vice-president took charge of the government. During those months of political uncertainty, the exchange-control system that guided the nation's imports became largely non-functional as the black-market price for the dollar began to spiral out of control. The resultant inflation reached an estimated 150 000 per cent by 2018 and cut into purchasing power as wages failed to catch up. A second early development that signalled acute conflict and instability was the refusal of the opposition and the United States (US) government to recognise Maduro's triumph in the presidential elections following Chávez's death in March 2013. The increasingly hostile position of both these actors toward the Venezuelan government culminated in 2019 with the formation, in defiance of Maduro, of a parallel government headed by National Assembly president Juan Guaidó and its immediate recognition by Washington.

Another problematic characteristic of the Maduro presidency that manifested itself at the start was his tendency to refrain from taking difficult but necessary measures and acting boldly and decisively to face pressing problems. Thus Maduro failed to act on charges, formulated by former insiders in 2014, that the nation had been bilked of twenty billion dollars through the manipulation of the exchange-control system, even though the president recognised the possible veracity of the accusation. Indeed, the increasing disparity between the official price that the government charged those whose request for dollars from the state was approved (in accordance with the exchange-control system) and the black-market price for dollars lent itself to corruption. As the disparity increased, so did the damage caused by Maduro's failure to modify or scrap the exchange-control system. In addition, in response to severe economic and political difficulties in mid-2014, Maduro promised a cabinet shakeup (what he called *el gran sacudón*), creating great expectations. Not only did he put off making the announcement for over a month, but he retained most of the key members of his administration.

Finally, little over a year after Maduro assumed the presidency, international oil prices plummeted while Venezuela's oil output also declined significantly. Subsequently, oil prices began to recover but failed to come close to their pre-2014 levels, while production continued to decrease, partly as a result of US sanctions imposed on the state oil company, PDVSA.

These developments – involving foreign intervention, leadership capacity, international oil prices and the exchange-control system – have given rise to diverse opinions regarding the root cause of the Venezuelan crisis. Different theories put the blame on different actors – either Maduro and those surrounding him, or the Venezuelan opposition and the US government, or Washington alone. The fact that each of these problems dates back to the beginning of the Maduro government, if not before, confuses the effort to determine which one came first and could thus be considered

the pivotal factor.

Five major explanations have been put forward: the unrelenting hostility of internal and external adversaries, leading to international sanctions and threats of military action; the plummeting of international oil prices, aggravated by the government's failure to diversify production and sever dependency on petroleum; mistaken policies that discouraged private investments; the mismanagement and incompetence of the Maduro government; and socialism's inherent contradictions and unsustainability.

I argue in this essay that the answer to the question of what was the root cause of the current crisis is as follows: almost all the above, in that four of the five explanations contain important elements of truth. These four plausible explanations (excluding the implausible one that attributes Venezuela's difficulties to socialism's lack of viability) are not theories but factors that have together contributed to the crisis. No methodology can determine with precision the relative importance of each of them. Furthermore, the four reinforce one another. Consequently, one may, at least tentatively, assign equal weight to the four and in doing so dismiss the usefulness of attempting to single out one as the paramount cause. While one factor may be more important than others, they all contributed to the crisis in major ways and thus the effort to determine the relative weight of each one appears to be of limited value.

Moreover, the effort to identify one root cause often passes over the complexity of the problems currently confronting Venezuela. Each of the five above-mentioned theories – defended by politicians, political activists, journalists, think tanks and academics – is underpinned by distinct paradigms and sets of assumptions that often leave little room for the appreciation of complexity. The singling out of one overriding factor is also simplistic and misleading because, as stated above, the major factors are interrelated and reinforce one another, thus requiring an analysis based on contextualisation. The following essay will examine these shortcomings as well as the broad political implications of the various explanations.

The Five Explanations for the Crisis

Different ideologically charged opinions over the root cause of the Venezuelan crisis revolve in large part around chronological order. Anti-Maduro analysts and opposition leaders, for instance, argue that US-imposed sanctions against the Venezuelan government, as well as the decline in international oil prices in mid-2014, could not be held responsible for the nation's economic collapse because these factors followed rather than preceded the outset of the crisis. Accordingly, Juan Guaidó criticised UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet for warning about the harm caused by US-imposed sanctions, saying, "It is evident she lacks information about when the sanctions began"; he then chastised her for not being better informed (Matheus, 2019). Along the same lines, two-time opposition presidential candidate Henrique Capriles claimed that the crisis began prior to the fall of oil prices but for a long time was "ignored, repressed and covered" up by the government (Ellner, 2019a). The anti-Chavistas conclude that Maduro and his followers have scapegoated Washington and international oil prices for problems that are of their own making. Those more sympathetic to the Venezuelan government contest the accuracy of this sequence. Thus the issue of what came first is significant and open to debate.

Hostile actions of domestic and foreign adversaries

In August 2017, the Trump administration announced economic sanctions against Venezuela, which prohibited the purchase of bonds issued by the government or PDVSA and forbade the nation's US-based company CITGO from repatriating profits. Because the executive order was

explicitly designed to render significant damage to the Venezuelan economy, the date was widely seen as the initiation of what the Chavistas call the “economic war” against Venezuela. Those who ascribe the Venezuelan crisis to government incompetence and/or mistaken policies discard the importance of the sanctions on the grounds that the crisis was already underway when the Trump administration first implemented them.

Nevertheless, pinpointing the beginning of US-supported efforts that undermined economic stability in Venezuela is problematic. President Obama’s executive order in 2015 declared Venezuela “an unusual and extraordinary threat” to US national security. The broadly worded order created a list of those Venezuelans whose assets are blocked or visas restricted due to, among other charges, involvement “in actions or policies undermining democratic processes or institutions” (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Obama’s order was not as dramatic and explicit as that of Trump and thus received less attention and did not become the focus of debate, nor did it trigger the formation of an important pro-Venezuela solidarity movement at the international level. Some analysts and political activists viewed the sanctions as innocuous or, in the words of Guaidó, not directed at the nation but “at corrupt functionaries and violators of human rights” (Matheus, 2019). Nevertheless, Obama’s executive order sent a signal to the private sector. After the order was implemented, various large US firms including Ford and Kimberly Clark closed factories and pulled out of Venezuela, in the process heavily impacting the economy. Furthermore, the sanctions against Venezuela and Venezuelans, albeit on a more modest scale, dated back to the administration of George W. Bush (Congressional Research Service, 2019). Bush’s sanctions banned the sale of spare parts to the Venezuelan air force’s flagship fighter jets, the F-16s.

Much depends on how the issue of hostility against the Chavista government is framed. It makes a difference whether what is under examination is an “economic war” or whether it takes into account other forms of hostility with economic repercussions, and whether the focus is on US-initiated actions or also includes those of the domestic opposition supported by Washington. Some of the economic problems currently afflicting Venezuela resulted from regime-change efforts by a “disloyal opposition” – that is, an opposition that refused to recognise the government’s legitimacy. Thus, for instance, the system of exchange controls, which has been largely responsible for the nation’s high inflation rate and its steady increase since 2012, was implemented after a two-month general strike spearheaded by the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce (FEDECAMARAS) in 2002–2003 threatened to trigger capital flight. Continuing fear of capital flight driven by a hostile private sector intent on regime change is one reason why the system was not subsequently discontinued or modified in fundamental ways.

Oil dependence and international oil prices

Academics, political commentators and political actors are divided over whether the sharp decline in oil prices played a major role in setting off the Venezuelan crisis. Over the decades, writers on Venezuela, influenced by dependency and world systems theories, consistently pointed out that the volatility of oil prices played havoc with economic and political stability, an argument applied to the current situation by analysts of different political persuasions (López Maya, 2016: 330). Venezuela under Maduro, like elsewhere in the Global South, has been hurt not only by low oil prices but also by sharp market fluctuations. Government commitments and popular expectations were heightened during the boom period but generated frustration and anger when prices later fell, thus contributing to the nation’s political turmoil and crisis (Bergquist, 1986; Ellner, 2019a). In this sense, Maduro was at a considerable disadvantage in comparison to Chávez.

The harshest critics of Chavismo deny the importance of oil prices as a cause of the Venezuelan crisis and instead blame Maduro for the nation’s economic difficulties. Moisés Naím,

former Development Minister under the neo-liberal government of Carlos Andrés Pérez and subsequently editor of *Foreign Policy*, and Venezuelan specialist Javier Corrales argue that (in the words of Moisés Naím and economist Francisco Toro) “all the world’s petrostates suffered a serious income shock in 2014 as a result of plummeting oil prices [but] only Venezuela could not withstand the pressure” (Naím and Toro, 2018a: 128; Corrales, 2017: 31). Nevertheless, while Venezuela was the OPEC nation most adversely affected by the sharp downturn in oil prices, it was also the only one (along with Iran) subject to international sanctions.

Writers belonging to the school of “neo-extractivism” criticise Chávez and Maduro and other pro-leftist “Pink Tide” governments for having failed to sever dependence on basic commodity exports and to anticipate price declines, such as occurred after the 2008 stock crash that led to Venezuela’s economic crisis (Lander, 2012: 79–86). Scholars across the political spectrum have generally accepted this observation. However, while most neo-extractivism scholars centre their analysis on the harmful impact of extractivism, and pass over the Pink Tide’s possible redeeming features (Ellner, 2019b: 15–17), writers sympathetic to the Chavista government recognise its failure to reduce the hold of the nation’s rentier economy but also point to positive features. Thus they present a balanced view of government strategy that inadvertently contributed to the nation’s pressing economic problems, and in doing so underline the complexity of the Venezuelan crisis and its multiple causes (Katz, 2015: 32–33). Greg Wilpert (2012: 159, 2015), for instance, has written that although Chávez and Maduro failed to use oil revenue to overcome dependence, with “the social economy the ... government is planting the seeds of a transformative alternative”. James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer for their part hold the Pink Tide governments, including that of Venezuela, responsible for their vulnerability to the volatility of global markets. Nevertheless, they consider Venezuela a special case and credit it for promoting the “socialization of production” and “substantive changes” in contrast to Bolivia and other Pink Tide countries (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2014: 11, 39; Petras, 2019).

Mistaken policies and strategies

Some political analysts single out unfriendly government policies toward domestic and foreign capital and resultant disinvestment as the principal cause of the crisis. According to this position, Venezuela went the furthest of any of the Pink Tide governments in expropriating numerous companies and (under Maduro) placing a cap of 30 per cent on profits. These policies explain why the nation was hardest hit by the economic downturn in the second decade of the century.

The contextualisation of this factor and the chronology of events related to economic policies help rule out the explanation that the socialist character of the government was the cause of the crisis. The resistance to the Chávez government by FEDECAMARAS and other peak employer organisations preceded Chávez’s proclamation of socialism as a national goal in 2005 and the mass expropriations following his third presidential election in 2006. In fact, FEDECAMARAS opposed Chávez’s first presidential candidacy in 1998 and went on to spearhead the April 2002 coup as well as the 2002–2003 general strike (which, in effect, was a lock-out). The radicalisation of FEDECAMARAS’ position was an immediate reaction to legislation passed in late 2001 consisting of agrarian reform and measures applied to the oil industry, which reflected an economic nationalism that undid the neo-liberal “Oil Opening” (*Apertura Petrolera*) of the 1990s (Ellner, 2008: 114). This sequence of events explains why the argument that anti-business policies were the main cause of the crisis conflicts with the “socialism doesn’t work” explanation (to be discussed below).

The disinvestment resulting from policies considered “anti-business” may be tied to another factor discussed in this article in the section titled “Hostile Actions of Domestic and Foreign Adversaries”. There are two possible dynamics at play related to disinvestment. Domestic and

foreign capital may have disinvested as a result of market considerations – that is, because projected profits were perceived to be insufficient to justify continued operations. The second possibility is that investment decisions were politically motivated as the private sector sought to pressure the government into modifying policies, or to generate economic instability leading to regime change. US policy toward Venezuela, beginning with President George W. Bush labelling it a hostile state and culminating with the international campaign unleashed by Trump, played into the second dynamic, consisting of a consciously devised political strategy. Both dynamics undoubtedly played a role (Ellner, 2017), thus confirming the central thesis of this article regarding the interconnectedness of the basic factors contributing to the Venezuelan crisis.

Another policy that is alleged to have contributed to the economic crisis is Venezuela's foreign policy, which antagonised the United States. Jorge Castañeda (2008: 238–239) has argued that Venezuela paid a heavy price for Chávez's anti-Americanism in that it jeopardised his nation's oil exports to its principal market, a claim that has also been made against Maduro. However, Castañeda and others who condemn Chávez's hostile declarations toward Washington fail to contextualise US–Venezuelan relations (see also Muravchik, 2019: 33). The contextualisation of the tensions between the two nations is useful in that it helps determine whether Chávez's and Maduro's denunciations of the US were pure demagoguery, as these writers allege, or were basically reactive. In spite of his fiery rhetoric, in the leadup to the 1998 presidential elections and his first several years in office, Chávez generally showed moderation in his interaction with the US. Even shortly after the Washington-supported coup in April 2002 and then the creation of the "Office of Transition Initiatives" operating out of the US embassy in Caracas, Chavez was discrete in his references to the US government (Harnecker, 2005: 134; Ellner, 2008: 199). The first sign of open hostility between the two nations was the decision of the Bush administration to recall its ambassador in Caracas and its questioning of Chávez's democratic credentials in response to his cautiously-worded criticism of US bombings in Afghanistan in late 2001.

Leadership capacity, incompetence and misrule

Many of those vehemently opposed to Maduro single out government incompetence as the main factor behind the crisis in all its dimensions. When Venezuela was hit with severe electricity shortages in early 2019, opposition leaders and Washington spokespeople, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, alleged that the problem was due to incompetence and not sabotage as the Venezuelan government claimed. They pointed out that power outages had become common (albeit not of the same lengthy duration) years prior to the implementation of sanctions and that more recently many of the technicians who worked for the state electricity company had emigrated (Duber and Castro, 2019: A-7; Sheridan and Zuñiga, 2019: A-1). Journalist and NGO participant Mary Anastasia O'Grady as well as the left-leaning Catholic publication *Commonweal* emphasised the Chavistas' incompetence in explaining other pressing problems, such as poverty and the distortions caused by the exchange control system, including hyper-inflation (O'Grady, 2016: A-19; *Commonweal*, 2019: 5; *The Economist*, 2019: 47).

Anti-Chavistas who attributed Venezuela's crisis to government incompetence pointed to various aspects of Chavista rule in order to back their claim. In the first place, President Chávez fired all 18 000 PDVSA employees who participated in the 2002–2003 general strike to topple the government, most of whom were technical and professional personnel. After production was restored, the Chavista leaders drew the conclusion that loyalty and political considerations were more important than technical skill in running the industry (Ellner, 2008: 159–160). In the second place, the constant shuffling by Presidents Chávez and Maduro of their cabinet and selection of members who were not specialists in the field left the impression that political criteria were

prioritised over technical ones. In addition, the list of nearly one hundred top Chavistas whom the US government (as well as Canada and the European Union) sanctioned on grounds of illicit and unethical behaviour contributed to the notion that the Chavistas were unqualified to rule. Finally, anti-Chavistas at all levels sometimes pointed to the class origins of Chávez and Maduro (the latter was a bus driver) as evidence that they lacked the necessary skills to run the country (Salazar Huneus, 2017).

Chronology and context need to be brought into the discussion of leadership skills, as is the case with the three other factors behind the nation's crisis. As referred to above, Maduro inherited an exchange-control system that had gotten out of control during the months of a veritable power vacuum following Chavez's absence from the country prior to his death in 2013. Another contextual consideration is the sharpness of the contrast in oil prices after 2014 compared with the steady increases of the Chávez years, thus generating discontent among Venezuelans whose living standards deteriorated significantly and reinforcing the view that Maduro was incompetent.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Maduro's decision-making capacity did not match that of Chávez. The latter, for instance, acted immediately and decisively to face a financial crisis occurring in 2009 by jailing various top members of the private sector who were closely associated with his government and were held responsible for the calamity. At the same time, he nationalised various poorly managed banks that were on the verge of collapse and merged them into the newly created Banco Bicentenario. In contrast, Maduro waited until mid-2017 to take visible measures against corruption by choosing Tarek William Saab as attorney general, who ordered the arrest of numerous top PDVSA executives accused of corruption. By then, however, the problem was of greater proportions and much more difficult to confront given the nation's political climate. An additional aspect of leadership deficiency was Maduro's failure to explain with detailed evidence the effects and multiple dimensions of the "economic war" on Venezuela and his over-reliance on shibboleths and slogans; this stood in sharp contrast to Chávez's communication skills, which were recognised even by his adversaries.

Those who consider government incompetence as the root explanation for the crisis often link it with the implementation of ill-advised policies, in particular ones that were hostile toward the private sector, such as expropriations. Naím and Toro (2018b), for instance, claim that "Maduro plainly has no clue how to reverse any of the multiple crises he has set off". Their basic argument is that the Venezuelan problem consists of "sheer incompetence". By way of example they claim that the government appointed "Chávez cronies" who lacked the expertise to administer "one expropriated company after another" (Naím and Toro, 2018a: 130, 133). At the same time, those who emphasise incompetence typically view "socialist ideology" as a mere "vener" (Kumanaev, 2018: C-1). Naím and Toro (2018a: 128) point out that the Venezuelan economic crisis cannot be attributed to socialism because the economies of other Pink Tide countries were also critically affected, even though not all of them were committed to socialist goals.

The "socialism doesn't work" narrative

The anti-socialist narrative on Venezuela was articulated by President Trump during his 2017 UN General Assembly address when he stated: "The problem in Venezuela is not that socialism has been poorly implemented, but that socialism has been faithfully implemented" (Aleem, 2017: n.p.). When Trump repeated the claim in his 2019 State of the Union address, it was obviously designed to be used as a major talking point for his 2020 presidential bid. Undoubtedly, Trump's intention was not to single out the small socialist wing of the Democratic Party headed by Bernie Sanders. According to the narrative, the entire Democratic leadership is committed to the implementation of socialist policies that threaten to lead to economic disaster, just as they did in Venezuela.

Think-tank pundits and other analysts on the right of the political spectrum also ascribe Venezuela's economic woes to socialism and, like President Trump, conflate reformist policies of an economic nature with socialist ones. Some criticise the mainstream media for downplaying or ignoring Venezuela's socialist character by referring to it as a "welfare state" and the government as "populist" (Rossell, 2015). One analyst writing in *Commentary* maintained that socialism in all its varieties had proved to be a failure with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a lesson that "seems to have been widely absorbed" until "Chavismo brought it all back" (Muravchik, 2019: 36). Another writing in *The New American* stated that until "average Venezuelans ... come to realize that socialism is at the root of their problems ... they will just keep replacing one left-wing government with another" (Tennant, 2017: 39). However, the thesis that points to socialism as the true culprit ignores the fact that between 70 and 80 per cent of the Venezuelan economy is in private hands.

In their analysis of the Venezuelan crisis, some of these writers, notably influenced by Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, equate Venezuelan socialism and state intervention in the economy with authoritarianism. William Poole (2017: 22) of the Cato Institute, an academic closely tied to private and state financial institutions, wrote in specific reference to Venezuela that, "despite Hayek's analysis and warnings..., socialism is indeed alive today in the less developed world, especially in South America". This argument is woven into the analysis of Venezuela's "humanitarian crisis" that posits extreme political repression as one of its facets and views the breakdown of democracy and the nation's economic debacle as intricately related. In accordance with this line of thinking, specific aspects of the government's economic policy, including price controls, the ceiling placed on the rate of profit, and measures that allegedly intimidate the private sector are labelled "authoritarian" (Corrales, 2016: 81–82).

Political Polarisation and Explanations for the Crisis: The Venezuelan Solidarity and Labour Movements

Venezuelan politics is highly polarised at the national level. Pro-Chavista leaders point to the implementation of international sanctions and (though to a lesser extent) low oil prices as responsible for the current crisis. Pro-opposition writers and political figures claim that the crisis is due either to the socialist model that is being followed or erroneous policies or incompetent leadership, and in some cases a combination of the latter two. Public opinion surveys, such as those of the pro-opposition Datanalisis, indicate a lesser degree of polarisation among the majority of Venezuelans, who condemn the sanctions, strongly criticise government policies and leadership, and have a negative view of the opposition (Woody, 2017; Venepress, 2018).

In addition, Venezuela was characterised during the Chavista years by sharp social polarisation. The opposition's social base of support was the middle and upper-middle classes, while the Chavistas relied on significant backing from the popular sectors. This dichotomy was put in evidence during the confrontational anti-Maduro protests that broke out in 2014, 2017 and 2019 (as well as during the Chávez years). In each case, the protests were concentrated in the more affluent municipalities and communities but for the most part failed to spread to the popular neighbourhoods. In contrast, the Chavistas in the case of Caracas usually marched from the city's low-income western half to the downtown area.

From the very outset of Chávez's government, the Venezuelan labour movement was highly polarised between pro- and anti-Chavista trade unionists. The anti-Chavista Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV), led by traditional labour leaders, played a major role in the attempt to oust Chávez in April 2002 and the abortive general strike in 2002–2003, resulting in the loss of most of its following. The CTV, aware that its alliance with FEDECAMARAS had cut into

its worker following, has attributed the crisis to Maduro's policies in general, without either condemning or supporting measures considered hostile to business interests (*El Nacional*, 2019). Labour leaders of the two split-offs from the Chavista workers' movement – the pro-Trotskyist Corriente Clasista, Unitaria, Revolucionaria y Autónoma (C-CURA) and the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNETE) – are now in the opposition camp and blame “reactionary” government policies, many favouring the business sector, for the crisis (Chirino, 2018).

Critical sectors of the Chavista labour movement supported Maduro's re-election in 2018 and recognise his government's legitimacy, but put forth their own narrative regarding the nation's economic crisis and its causes. By far the most visible and active component in this category is the peasant movement grouped in several organisations that participated in the “Admirable Campaign” in mid-2018, a 400-kilometre march to present a petition to President Maduro in person. The leaders of the march recognised the impact of international sanctions on the Venezuelan economy but also blamed the crisis on recent government agrarian policy and state bureaucrats tied to latifundistas and domestic and foreign agribusiness interests. Spokespeople for the group pointed out that peasant production accounted for 70 per cent of the nation's agricultural output and thus should be prioritised as part of the strategy to overcome the crisis (*Correo del Orinoco*, 2018).

The issue of the causes of the Venezuelan crisis, its complexity and the need to contextualise important events, and to distinguish between what is known as certain and what cannot be easily confirmed, is also at the heart of a dilemma facing the international solidarity movement opposed to sanctions. The movement has had to choose between two different strategies, each with its own narrative regarding the crisis. The first centres its arguments on the illegality of sanctions not authorised by the UN and the fact that historically they have never produced desired results and have always aggravated the suffering of the general population. This position condemns the sanctions without examining other possible causes for the crisis. The approach has the advantage of avoiding knotty issues related to internal politics and of being able to present simple, concise arguments. The second approach questions the validity of the charges against the Maduro government used to justify the imposition of sanctions and military intervention. These solidarity activists counter the anti-Maduro narrative that attributes the Venezuelan crisis to socialist policies or the incompetence of policy-makers, arguments that are often decontextualised (Felicien, Schiavoni and Romero, 2018: 17). The second approach is a harder sell than the first given the complexity of the problem of decontextualisation and other issues discussed in this article. The approach, however, has the advantage of winning over those who consider that international sanctions and other forms of foreign intervention may be justified in certain circumstances. In short, the analysis of root causes of the Venezuelan crisis, put forward by scholars, journalists, political commentators and activists, has a major impact on political strategies both within the nation and at the international level.

Concluding Remarks

The recognition of the importance of all four of the above-mentioned factors in explaining Venezuela's current crisis goes a long way toward countering the narratives of various political actors. Most importantly, the narrative that serves to justify attempts at regime change places the blame solely on government incompetence and badly conceived policies, while discarding the relevance of international sanctions and oil prices. The logic of this line of thinking is as follows: Since the major international sanctions and the downturn in oil prices followed the outbreak of the crisis, they cannot be blamed for having created it; the Maduro government is solely responsible for the nation's pressing economic problems, and its ouster is thus a *sine qua non* for overcoming

them. The argument, however, focuses exclusively on the sanctions implemented by Trump and ignores Washington's support for Venezuela's "disloyal" opposition dating back to the early years of Chávez's rule.

At the same time, recognition of leadership shortcomings as an important contributing factor undermines the pro-Chavista narrative, which emphasises one factor over all others, namely the damage caused by international sanctions. Maduro and other Chavista leaders acknowledge that mistakes have been made, although they fail to specify what they were. The gravity of the failure to act decisively in such cases as the twenty-million-dollar corruption scandal and the exchange-control system fiasco suggests leadership deficiency. The problem, however, also needs to be contextualised. The intensity of existing political tensions diminishes the likelihood that the Chavistas will question the government's leadership capacity. Aspects of the nation's political environment – the existence of a "disloyal" opposition and the actions and military threats from abroad – mitigate against the possibility that government supporters initiate a process of introspection and self-criticism, and that rival Chavista leaders who share the movement's goals emerge from within Chavismo.

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