

Venezuela's political chaos: Flailing president and strong generals

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It has been a little more than a year since the demise of President Hugo Chavez and his Vice President Nicolas Maduro's rise to power. The overall political situation in Venezuela, however, seems to have deteriorated since Maduro and his Socialist Party narrowly won the last presidential elections in April 2013. Maduro seems to have facilitated the dominance of Venezuela's military which has resultantly reduced the role of the private sector in the economic activities. The performance of the oil sector has shown a downturn as compared to the position prevailing during Chavez's regime. The oil sector's contribution to the country's GNP has declined below 30%. More than 70% of consumer goods are presently being imported and annual inflation has risen to more than 50%. President Maduro has been using the state-controlled militia known as 'collectivos' to terrorise the anti-Maduro protestors.

The latest series of student-led violence started after protests on 2nd February this year over a rape case in San Cristobal, a west Venezuelan town bordering Colombia. Nearly 40 Venezuelans including the state armed forces' personnel have died in the continuing violence. It appears that the present protests have a broad measure of popular support including that from Monsignor Diego Padro, head of the Conference of Bishops of Venezuela. Other prominent leaders supporting the protest include Leopoldo Lopez Mendoza, the firebrand Harvard-educated opposition leader of the Voluntad Popular party, Mario Machado, Member of the National Assembly and Governor Henrique Capriles. Also a former army general, Antonio Rivera is reported to have gone underground and joined those opposed to the Maduro regime.

Venezuela has not been able to politically and economically stabilize itself in the past few years owing to internal economic mismanagement despite greater state involvement in the social sector. Consistent US opposition at the bilateral level particularly after Chavez took control of the country's oil resources, the lack of effective support from the Latin American

multilateral institutions and the inadequate growth of domestic institutions have all combined to adversely affect Venezuela. Increasing checks by the government and the lack of participation in grass-root organizations have also militated against strengthening of the state structure during the Chavez period.

The US-dominated Organization of American States (OAS) has worked to thwart the consensus building among Latin American nations for developmental assistance to Venezuela without undermining its sovereignty. Chavez tried to counter this trend by seeking political and development support from Cuba including its expertise and deployment of Cuban manpower to improve conditions in Venezuela's social sector. Chavez had also worked through the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) comprising 12 Latin American member countries to garner support for Venezuela's economic policies and obtain developmental packages in key sectors like health and infrastructure and towards empowerment of its rural institutions. These efforts succeeded to an extent but not fully.

Recently the UNASUR set up a group of ministers on 12th March to broker a political dialogue between the Maduro regime and its opponents. The current situation had become quite volatile including firings by the state armed units against the students-led anti-government protesters, the stripping of the opposition legislatures protection-cum-immunity, the imprisonment of Mario Machada and the custodial detention of Leopoldo Lopez.

There is an urgent need to stem the present slide of Venezuela into further political chaos. The internal economic conditions will only worsen unless a political accommodation is arrived at soon. The efficacy of multilateral institutions in Latin America not subservient to US interests is also on test. The UNASUR Treaty has an Additional Protocol instituted on 26th November, 2010 which enables the organization under Article 5 of the Protocol to use its good offices and take diplomatic steps to promote the restoration of democracy in the affected countries. Though this provision was intended to counter the impact of military coups, its application consensually and impartially vis-à-vis the local contestants in Venezuela, in a benevolent manner, may diffuse the current political crises without undermining the duly elected Maduro government.

It is also necessary that some political space be given to the opposition, particularly the political forces backing Machada, Lopez as well as Governor Capriles. If the existing institutions of Venezuela are not allowed to function or are constricted further by

continuous pressures from either the government or the protesters a dangerous vacuum already existing would exacerbate leading to all-round instability. Already there is a drift in the decision-making at the national level with overt consequences like runaway inflation, scarcity of essential consumer goods and slowdown in oil output. Moreover, several high court posts as well as the national election council posts are lying vacant. Another vacancy will arise shortly when the incumbent Attorney General (Fiscal General) & National Ombudsman demits office later this year. It may not be possible to appoint functionaries in these state positions who can function with credibility and confidence of the Venezuelan people, without a broad political understanding between President Maduro, his political supporters and the main opposition leaders.

The UNASUR has its role cut out in the current Venezuelan political backdrop. With neighbouring Colombia recently reaching an understanding with the FARC guerillas, irritants by way of Colombia accusing Venezuela of sheltering the guerillas or allowing the latter's territory to be used by them for logistics and operations may no longer arise. Venezuela would consequently be in a position to obtain a broad measure of support from all its neighbours as well as from Argentina and Brazil – the two major countries who have been generally supportive of Venezuela both in the OAS and UNASUR.

The test of President Maduro will lie in his skills to obtain a level of active support from the UNASUR to overcome the present political impasse without either eroding his domestic authority or becoming a source of discord within UNASUR. On the other hand, the success of UNASUR will depend on the extent to which it is able to take consensual and affirmative action towards curbing authoritarianism within Venezuela without undermining the authority of the Maduro regime or limiting Venezuela's sovereignty and stalling any outside attempt of manipulation and influence.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.