

## **An Oral History of Grassroots Venezuelans in the Midst of the Economic War**

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The economic war is in full force in Venezuela but, as per usual, the international media continues to misrepresent the roots of the economic problems and the more complex and nuanced attitudes of grassroots Venezuelans who are confronting these daily challenges. CNBC just ran a headline claiming that “Venezuela tops list (again) of most miserable countries...” based on a study by the right-wing US-based think tank, the CATO institute. Photos of people waiting in lines at supermarkets to buy toilet paper and cooking oil have been broadcast around the globe, and from afar, it looks like a desperate and dire situation.

While the shortages and long-lines are creating serious inconveniences and undeniable burdens on most Venezuelans, beyond the frustration, the voices of grassroots Venezuelans are getting lost beneath negative predictions of macroeconomic collapse. In the face of a complex situation, the Venezuelans that I interviewed this past week demonstrated incredible resilience, complex analysis and an enormous amount of patience. In this oral history collage, members of the Venezuelan grassroots and popular movements speak for themselves about the roots of the economic war, their strategies in the face of it, and the solutions that they propose.

The following interviews were conducted on January 21, during a rally in the Plaza Bolivar in Caracas, in anticipation of President Maduro's annual address to the legislature. All of the people interviewed were present to show their support for President Maduro and they all come from the popular classes. I asked the narrators about the current economic situation, who they saw as responsible and what they thought the solutions to the economic crisis might be. The interviews were edited, selected and translated by myself.

### **Maribel Lenda from Caracas:**

Food is a little bit scarce, its true. We can't all say that it is the fault of the government, but we know that it is a media war that is being waged against our president, Nicolas Maduro. It's clear to us that this is a war. Many people say that the situation in the country is bad. But these are people who haven't stopped to think that the opposition has planted this problem for 2 years so that people respond and so that the revolution doesn't continue.

We should be aware that this situation we're experiencing should be fleeting. The fact that there isn't toilet paper, nor flour, nor coffee, nor milk...everything that we housewives and that everyone complains about, this should be fleeting because Maduro is doing all that he can at the international level. The places he went [his international tour of China, the Middle East, etc.], he didn't go as a beggar because Venezuela is rich, rich in resources like iron, oil, gold and we can be of help to other countries.

**David Mendez, unemployed graduate from the Bolivarian University in Caracas**

In this economic situation, it would be good for there to be more economic opportunities for youth – more equality. I want Maduro to do something, the unemployment, the economic situation, the scarcity, the sabotage from the right that still has a stronghold in the government. I want him to do something for the country and for Venezuelans. The situation is actually difficult and we don't want the country to end up in the abyss.

**Maria Luna, Porvenir, La Pastora, Caracas**

We don't have to be overwhelmed by anguish and desperation over the shortages in goods. If I go and get 2 packets of corn today and 2 packets of corn tomorrow, I am taking it away from others who might be able to have it, who might have more of a necessity than I do.

Bartering is happening in my community. There are women in my community who have coffee, and they will exchange it with me for milk or sugar, or whatever one has.

The lines and the corruption its going to come to an end. I have faith that it will because this situation with food that we Venezuelans are living in is going to end. They [the media/the opposition] treat us like we are idiots, by saying that it is the fault of the government but we are clear and firm in our support of the president. This is a question of consciousness. If we are part of the revolution, we have to say, "the revolution is not toilet paper, it is not flour." Sure, if we don't eat, we can't sustain ourselves. But we have to remain calm and we have to be aware that they are taking us towards a civil war among Venezuelans, and this is what we have to avoid. For this reason we need to have calmness, consciousness and patience. The people of Bolivar are fighting to move forward this life-project that our Comandante Chavez gave us... don't believe the rumors.

**Marcelo De la Rosa, a Colombian national who has lived in Venezuela for 37 years, La Pastora, Caracas**

The economic situation is delicate in the country in this moment because we are in the middle of an economic war created by the Empire to fuel tensions between people and to topple our government because their other strategies to do so [topple the government] have failed. This impacts all of us. Not only the opposition but the revolutionaries too. Perhaps, the revolutionaries more because we are poorer. The opposition has money, and they have their money saved

outside of the country in dollars. They are doing what they can to devalue the Bolivar, because the more that the Bolivar is devalued, the more that they are millionaires.

This is a conspiracy, not only by the US but by Colombia, Europe, etc.... Here there are shortages and lines but people have money to buy. In Colombia, you go there, and you will see there are not lines and they have everything [stocked goods in stores] but people don't have money to buy it. In Colombia, people might buy a little rice, a tomato; here people buy food and have money to spend, for people who don't pay attention or don't understand this, they really just don't get it.

The mixed responsibility in the economic crisis is undeniable. There are corrupt politicians who sell-out, revolutionaries who get handed a million dollars and forget about the revolution. It's true, there are members of the military and national guard that have been corrupt forever and it has not changed.

### **Carbin Mero, San Juan**

The political situation that we are living in with respect to the economic war that we have been confronting for the last five months is a capitalist strategy from past regimes. The economic war is a well-tuned strategy, in which governments are brought down by highly calculated methods enacted by the capitalist class and the empire, they have done it before.

If you listen to what they say in the media, this economic war will not end until the government stops messing with the private sectors. The government is too submissive to the parasitic bourgeois and owning class. What the elite are trying to do, is to force neoliberal reforms, this is really what they want.

Hope is here in the streets. We need to show the importance of the mobilizations. We also need to demonstrate our co-responsibility in this situation, in how we behave when we go to buy things. There is a maturing discourse and analysis about the situation today, about the circumstances that have been created by those who dominate the economy of Venezuela. We are living in a barter market, and while it is born out of necessity today...('you have that, and I have this, let's exchange...'). It's something that we could build in the future in a way that is more comfortable, more planned.

[The solution is...] participation, mobilization, the co-responsibility that we have. [We need to] act as if we are truly a social class and not defend the rights of those who have oppressed us, those who still oppress us, and those who want a government that would continue to oppress us economically through neoliberal reforms.

### **Barbara Duran, from Valle de Tuy, Miranda state, 16 years old**

There is an economic war, yes...but we have to control this. This is not the sole problem of the president, we can't fall into this imperialist and opposition trap. There is scarcity, lines, hoarding,

contraband, re-selling but this is not just the president's fault, all Venezuelans need to assume responsibility for this problem: as Venezuelans, as revolutionaries.

**Angel Rorones, from La Vega, Caracas**

It is called an economic war, and I think that is correct. Importers are hoarding goods, business that are producing are not distributing their products equitably or quickly, and this is what is creating lines because throughout the country, there are long lines, not only in Caracas. You go to a supermarket and there are lines and people don't even know what they are going to get that day. People are tired of the lines but they are not tired of the revolution. We are going to defend the revolution on whatever terrain we have to, when we have to, in the necessary moment.

Yes, we are all annoyed about the lines. It causes inconvenience. I am annoyed and I am a revolutionary Chavista. We are annoyed but it is not the government's fault. As poor and working people (we are not the bourgeoisie), we want to buy goods at the subsidized government-run stores, this means that we have to wait in line to get the significantly cheaper goods.

It is also the government's fault for a lack of vigilance for those who are ripping us off. But right now, I think that it is too much [for the government to enforce]. Perhaps the government arrives to a store to enforce the price controls but the next day, they leave and the company raises prices. But, people are still buying.

**Eva Haranino, from Propatria in Caracas:**

This is the opposition that is creating this problem, this disaster. We are getting by, that's what we are doing. But if they come to power, we will be even worse off because all they want is all the money of Venezuela, and to take our oil out of the country.

The solution? Know how to wait.

**Conclusions:**

And yes, Venezuelans are definitely waiting; not only in lines but they are also fine tuning another form of waiting, a patience that is rooted in their belief that the opposition's attempt to undermine the Bolivarian Revolution will fail, as long as they do not feed into the hysteria, and find survival strategies to weather this storm.

While the international business press has talked about the movement away from "monetization" as if that were an indicator of doomsday, the Venezuelans that I spoke with noted how a barter economy has sprouted up to help people meet their needs outside of a formal market economy. While the circumstances have led to people building such solutions out of necessity, a silver

lining is that people are seriously talking about the need to reduce dependency on imports, and on the capitalist system in general.

Another essential point to note is the difference between scarcity of commodities and hunger. I repeatedly heard Venezuelans explain that they and their neighbors are not going hungry and that many of them have money to spend (not to mention their own private stockpiles of goods.) The economic war is based on generating a psychological experience of scarcity, which the international and opposition press has continued to feed into and encourage, this leads many Venezuelans to feel like they are in a sinking ship and therefore, they go to buy more which means longer lines.

Members of the social movements reiterated the importance of consciousness, not only in analyzing the root cause of the crisis (“Who benefits from the crisis?” a sign read at the rally in Plaza Bolivar) but also what appropriate individual and collective action to take in the face of the assault. Of those who came out to show their support for the government and their opposition to the economic war, there was a clear consensus that the lack of basic goods is a part of a well-formulated strategy initiated by the opposition and the imperial interests of global capital.

Additionally, most people also acknowledged some responsibility on the part of the Venezuelan government – either noting saboteurs from within the government, corrupt politicians and military who are profiting from or complicit in the contraband and a failure to enforce price controls. Some were also critical of inaction on concrete policies.

In whispers, some activists shared, off the record, that there are groups of Chavista militants that are meeting to survey areas where there are long lines and to ensure that things stay peaceful. Based on government intelligence and common sense, many Chavistas see the concentration of people waiting in lines as possible targets of violent provocation by the right-wing opposition and people are on high-alert to prevent violence or further instability.

The people that I interviewed were encouraging for others to stay calm, not feed into the hysteria induced by the media, not buy more than you need, and, at best, use this as an opportunity to build alternative means of production and distribution that are not dependent on global capitalism. Some people are learning how to make soap, others are making home-made cleaning remedies using baking soda and vinegar. While these adaptation strategies are born out of a real and frustrating necessity, many Venezuelans acknowledge the need to build an alternative economy and are therefore trying to convert this crisis into opportunity to do so.

I was struck by how many people asserted a need to be patient. Despite truly difficult challenges, the dedicated Chavista revolutionaries from within the popular sectors largely advocated for sticking it out, finding creative solutions to the daily inconveniences, raising consciousness, remaining non-violent and being patient.