

# The New York Times

## Slum Dwellers in Caracas Ask, What Protests?

By William Neuman  
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CARACAS, Venezuela — On the east side of this capital city, where the rich people tend to live, most children have stayed home from school for more than a week, protest bonfires burn in the streets at night, stores shut early and carnival celebrations have been canceled.

But on the west side, where many of the poor people live under tin roofs, you would hardly know that the country has been stirred by weeks of unrest. Schools operate normally, restaurants serve up arepas, and residents, enjoying the extra days off that President Nicolás Maduro has given the country, prepare to crown their carnival queens.

Both sides of this city, the better off and the poorer, are dealing with many of the same frustrations: one of the world's worst inflation rates, hours spent in line to buy food and other basic goods in short supply, and rampant violent crime.

But while the poor are often hit especially hard by these troubles, the protests shaking the capital this month have been dominated by the city's middle- and upper-class residents. They have poured into the streets of their neighborhoods en masse, turning them into barricaded redoubts. Yet in the city's poorer sections, life has mostly gone on as usual.

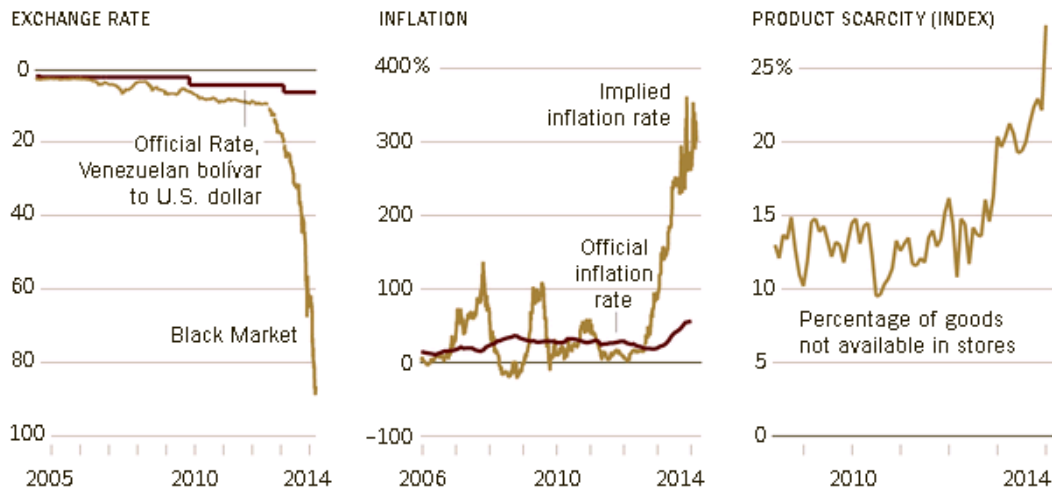
The split personality in this city mirrors the deep divide that cleaves this oil-rich nation into supporters and opponents of the socialist-inspired revolution begun by Hugo Chávez, who was president for 14 years until he died nearly a year ago.

Tensions from that longstanding rift have exploded in protests sweeping the country against the government of Mr. Chávez's successor, Mr. Maduro, resulting in violent clashes between civilians and National Guard soldiers. More than a dozen people have been killed, with security forces implicated in several cases. Mr. Maduro, speaking at a conference called to promote dialogue, said a soldier was killed on Friday in Valencia, the country's third-largest city.

For all the upheaval, the disconnect between wealthier and poorer areas could seriously limit the impact of the protest movement, a weakness that some of its leaders seem keenly aware of.

## Venezuela's Economic Woes

Since the death of president Hugo Chávez in 2013, Venezuela has been in economic turmoil. Unofficial calculations based on black market exchange rates show an economy in peril. In an attempt to slow inflation, the government has set prices for many goods, but this has led to empty shelves and a high scarcity rate.



Sources: Steve H. Hanke, Johns Hopkins-Cato Institute Troubled Currencies Project, Banco Central de Venezuela

“Change is not possible in Venezuela if the slums are not involved,” Henrique Capriles, the opposition politician who narrowly lost to Mr. Maduro in an election last year, said recently at a large rally that took place — once again — on the wealthy side of town.

Election after election has shown that this country is sharply divided, but the political divisions here are not as simple as a split between rich and poor — though it may seem that way based on where the protests are happening and how the government portrays them.

Many of the city’s poorer residents wholeheartedly support the government, and aside from some gatherings in poor neighborhoods where residents bang pots in anger, the major protests have not taken place in the slums or drawn noticeably large contingents from them. Mr. Maduro has seized on this repeatedly, and has dismissively depicted the demonstrators as “fascist, spoiled, rich kids.”

But many in the capital’s slums have sincere doubts about the government, or flatly oppose it. Some have joined the protests in other parts of the city. Still, many say they have deliberately kept clear of the demonstrations because of the threat of violence or because they do not trust the opposition. Others reject its central demand that Mr. Maduro be pushed from office, saying he was elected and that it would subvert democracy to oust him.

“I’m a Chavista but things are going badly,” said Estefanía Medina, 26, a restaurant worker who lives in a slum in a tiny brick hut perched precariously on a hillside. “Maduro is doing things badly. But I don’t support the violence of the opposition either. They are full of hate.”

As the protests continued, Mr. Maduro added several extra days off for the traditional pre-Lent carnival holiday this weekend, including one on March 5, the anniversary of the death of Mr. Chávez.

Critics called the move an effort to dampen the protest movement, and some opposition-heavy cities and sections of the capital canceled carnival festivities, saying that with people dying in the protests, it was no time for celebration. Mr. Maduro criticized the cancellations and then played on the stereotype of a fat-cat government opponent traveling abroad for the holiday.

Saying that all flights out of the country were booked solid, Mr. Maduro said this week, “They leave the country and they take away or try to take away from the farmer, the worker, the student, the humble Venezuelan man and woman who live from their work, try to take away carnival, life, culture, music. I won’t permit it.”

As his opponent, Mr. Capriles, spoke at the recent rally, one person in the crowd that stretched for many blocks said he felt compelled to encourage other residents from poorer areas to come out as well. The protester, Jorge Lisboa, 24, a computer support worker, carried a sign referring to one of the capital’s most radically pro-government slums, known as 23 de Enero.

“I’m from 23 de Enero,” the sign said. “I’m not bourgeois, before all I’m Venezuelan and I’m in the opposition.”

His wife, Francis Bosch, an unemployed teacher, who is from the working class area of Catia, where the couple lives now, said: “The idea is to make people realize we’re all together in the same fight, we’re all going through the same things. If there’s crime, there’s crime everywhere.”

But while conditions are often tough in poor neighborhoods like Hornos de Cal and La Televisora, which cascade down the sides of a steep hill near the center of Caracas, things are far better than they were 15 years ago, before Mr. Chávez was president and before oil prices soared, bringing greater prosperity after years of hard times.

There is improved water and electrical service, and many homes now have telephone lines with broadband Internet provided by the government phone company. And there is a low-cost, government-built cable car that carries residents to and from the city center in minutes, a life-changing transformation from the past, when they had to slog up the hill or often pay taxis to drive them.

That has made many people reluctant to demonstrate against the government, even if they are unhappy with Mr. Maduro.

“Who will protest if every day they can ride the cable car and be glad to have that as a form of transport?” said Ms. Medina, the restaurant worker.

The complaints on both sides of town respond to the same conditions, but with a different tone. In the wealthier neighborhoods, opponents bemoan shortages and long lines at stores. In the slums, where many now consider themselves middle class, some fear slipping back into poverty and feel a sense of betrayal — Mr. Chávez would not have let things get this bad, they say again and again.

Many poorer residents also felt weary of the endless, bitter division, saying that leaders on both sides were more interested in defending their personal interests or ambitions than in working for the good of the country.

“What we need in this country is a new political leadership,” said Dorian Cartagena, 22, a student who voted for Mr. Maduro but is now critical of the government. “We need a new political ideology. When Chávez died, Chavismo died with him.”

Mr. Cartagena and his brother, Jhonny Cartagena, 18, both sympathized with the protesters but said they had not gone to protest, fearing violence. They said that rising prices and long lines had made life much more difficult for their families, and that if things got worse, people from the poorer west side of town might join those on the wealthier east side in greater numbers.

“When this blows up, when they join in the commotion,” Jhonny Cartagena said, referring to those living on the poorer side of town, “nothing will stop it.”

*María Eugenia Díaz contributed reporting.*