



Here's why this might be Venezuela's last chance to push Nicolás Maduro out

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The dust hasn't settled yet from this week's clashes in Caracas, Venezuela, after interim-president Juan Guaidó claimed to have the backing of the armed forces and called on Venezuelans to join him for a final push to oust Nicolás Maduro. It was the greatest challenge to the rule of Maduro since he consolidated his dictatorship in 2017, but the uprising has failed to achieve its goal — for now, at least.

Unfortunately, even with the support from some members of the military, the corruption inherent in Venezuela's socialist system is a strong defense against a democratic uprising.

Some observers blame Guaidó and his mentor, Leopoldo López — who was under house arrest but was freed by the intelligence officers in charge of his custody — for overplaying their hand. However, we don't know the exact circumstances under which they made the decision to launch a civic-military uprising.

Guaidó's freedom is increasingly under threat after the regime stripped him of his parliamentary immunity and threatened to jail him. The protests he has led in previous months — though massive — were mostly peaceful and didn't pose a threat to Maduro's narco-dictatorship. As the economy continues to collapse with day-long blackouts bringing the country to a halt, people are getting into survival mode, more consumed with securing food and water than toppling the regime. In the standoff between Maduro and Venezuela's democratic forces, time is on the regime's side.

Coordinating and executing a successful military uprising in Venezuela is extremely difficult. The top brass of the military is a criminal organization deeply involved in corruption, extortion, smuggling and drug trafficking. An incompetent general runs the dwindling but still profitable oil business — output collapsed to 732,000 barrels per day in March, a steep consistent decline since 2013. The U.S. Treasury Department labels several generals as drug-kingpins: a significant chunk, if not most of Colombia's cocaine production now goes through Venezuela. Thus, the incentives of the rank and file of the military to switch their loyalty to Guaidó, despite offers of amnesty, are almost nil.

There is growing dissatisfaction among the troops. After all, their relatives are not immune to the humanitarian crisis. About 1,000 Venezuelan soldiers have defected to Colombia just this year.

However, there are reports that their families back home have been harassed and tortured, raising the cost of turning against the regime. But the greatest challenge is the presence of thousands of Cuban operatives embedded in the armed forces — a fact acknowledged by President Donald Trump and disputed by Cuban diplomat Carlos Fernández de Cossío. Havana's decades-old Communist dictatorship is Maduro's closest ally, and by all accounts runs the show in Caracas. Cuba has one of the most sophisticated and ruthless intelligence services in the world. Venezuelan troops are closely watched and the price for any sign of disloyalty is steep: imprisonment and torture.

Venezuela's democratic forces are aware of the odds. They also know that this week's events are a turning point for them. Despite being recognized by over 50 nations as the country's legitimate president, Guaidó could be jailed at any moment. This might be the last chance to push Maduro out of power in the foreseeable future. Despite the welcome pressure of most of the international community, particularly the U.S., the future of Venezuela lays in the hands of Venezuelans themselves. Either they answer Guaidó's dramatic call to topple the dictatorship, or they risk oppression and misery for many years to come.

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