



As Venezuela plots violence against demonstrators, the world is watching

Roger F. Noriega

August 31, 2016

Venezuelans who support the country's democratic opposition are preparing to assemble peacefully on the streets of Caracas on September 1st to demand their constitutional right to recall President Nicolás Maduro, whose tenure has ushered in unprecedented levels of food shortages, insecurity, economic chaos, and repression. The protest was called by opposition leaders earlier this month in response to plotting by the National Electoral Council (CNE) to stall a referendum until next year to deny voters the right to oust the ruling party from power.

Thursday promises to be a test of wills. The regime already is jailing opposition leaders, deploying security forces to impede travel to the capital, and issuing threats to intimidate would-be demonstrators. According to sources within the regime, hardliners led by accused drug kingpin Diosdado **Cabello** and a cadre of Cuban advisors have issued verbal orders to use any means necessary, including violence, to beat back this challenge.

On Friday, Maduro **warned** that if opposition activists attempt to “heat up the streets,” they would be met with the “force of the revolution.” He also boasted that his government's reaction to an attempted “coup” would make Recep Tayyip Erdoğan look like a “little child,” referring to the brutal crackdown after the failed attempt to oust Turkey's leader in mid-July. By branding the opposition's peaceful protest a “coup,” Maduro is adopting a tactic of his predecessor Hugo Chávez to criminalize dissent in order to justify harsh repression.

Likewise, in recent days, the government has invented accusations as a pretext to jail a number of opposition activists. For example, 31-year-old lawyer Yon **Goicochea**, the 2008 winner of the Cato Institute's Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, was arrested Monday on terrorism charges. Many others were detained or forced into hiding in the last 48 hours as the government roundup began.

According to sources familiar with government planning, as well as eyewitnesses making their way to Caracas now, police and National Guard units have been deployed to frustrate those attempting to access the capital. For example, the 240-mile trek from to Caracas from Barquisimeto is hampered by no fewer than 17 checkpoints, and the Cabrera Tunnel has been closed.

For now, the regime's objective is to intimidate citizens from taking to the streets. According to a recent **poll**, 70% of the respondents in a nation of 30 million people said they intend to join the opposition rally. Such a turnout would be a massive repudiation of Maduro, so the regime is preparing to counterpunch. Clearly, the government is hoping that the international response to a crackdown would be as feckless as in 2014, when over 40 anti-government protesters were killed, hundreds were jailed, and thousands were beaten.

Since then, the political landscape in the region has shifted. A new Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, has repeatedly **admonished** the regime to respect its citizens. New presidents in Argentina, Brazil, and Peru have spoken in defense of human rights in Venezuela. Earlier this month, 15 OAS member states **urged** Venezuela to advance the referendum "without delay." Even the **United States'** position may be shifting out of neutral, as Secretary of State John Kerry has defended the constitutional right to the referendum. Moreover, according to US officials, the Obama administration is contemplating targeted sanctions against Venezuelans accused of corruption, repression, and narco-trafficking.

Maduro's handlers are making an improbable bet that security forces and thuggish militants can control opposition demonstrators without provoking widespread, bloody clashes. If such confrontations escalate, commanders of Venezuela's institutional military — led by Defense Minister General Vladimir Padrino López — will have to decide whether to defend peaceful demonstrators or follow Cubans and criminals in committing massive human rights atrocities that will earn them condemnation in The Hague.

In the meantime, it is not too late for the Obama administration to sanction individuals involved in repression and corruption, to administer a dose of accountability that could save many.