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JULIA BUXTON

Interview

VENEZUELA AFTER CHÁVEZ

After seventeen years of Chavista rule in Venezuela, the right-wing opposition has now swept the board in elections to the country's National Assembly, giving rise to a political deadlock. Can you talk us through the electoral geography and demography of the December 2015 vote?

ONE IMPORTANT THING to note about this result was its disproportional character. The Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) opposition front received 56 per cent of the popular vote, while the alliance led by the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) received 41 per cent. When that was translated into seats, however, the gap was much wider: 65 per cent to 33 per cent. The PSUV has paid the price for its own failure to address the problems with the electoral framework. There are 164 seats in play, with 113 elected on a first-past-the-post basis and the remaining 51 on a list system. The MUD did particularly well in large urban centres and the most industrially advanced regions of Venezuela, such as Zulia, on the border with Colombia, where its margin of victory was almost 24 per cent, and Miranda, where it bested the score for the PSUV alliance by nearly 21 per cent. The opposition is very well organized in western states like Mérida and Táchira, which had been the site of major student protests in 2013–14. The margin of victory in Táchira was almost 37 per cent, which is quite remarkable. By contrast, the areas where the PSUV and its Gran Polo Patriótico did well were rural constituencies, with an aged population and high levels of poverty and social marginalization. There is an important distinction to be made here, because in regions like Bolívar, Miranda and the Federal District, the popular classes defected in large numbers to the MUD, while the rural poor in areas such as Guárico and

Yaracuy remained loyal to the PSUV. Insofar as the PSUV did manage to hold on in certain regions, its lead over the opposition was quite small: 2.7 per cent in Yaracuy and 2 per cent in Guárico.

So there was large-scale defection from the Chavista camp to the opposition in the major cities? It wasn't simply a case of PSUV supporters abstaining from the vote?

That seems to have been the case. It's difficult to say exactly, because we don't have the level of empirical data that we would need. There has been a decline in the quality of the psephological research being carried out in Venezuela. In the early 2000s, with the breakdown of the traditional two-party system, some excellent work was being done by academics, based on interviews and surveys. Over the last ten years, the research agenda has focused less on numbers and more on grand ideological debates; as a result, we've lost a great deal of insight into the ethnography of voters in Venezuela. There is very little information available about gender or age breakdowns in the support for parties. Another problem for researchers is that Venezuelans can be reluctant to say how they intend to vote. But the general picture would certainly lead us to believe that many erstwhile Chavistas voted for the opposition. The turnout was quite high—74 per cent—and the MUD did well in former PSUV strongholds. That shift in political loyalties may not be deeply rooted, as many people probably voted for the opposition on pragmatic grounds, or in a protest against the government. But as things stand, the PSUV appears to have lost a very important part of its core vote. Nicolás Maduro remains President, but he faces a hostile obstructionist majority in the National Assembly, bent on removing him from office.

The western states have long been strongholds for the opposition?

Under the old Punto Fijo two-party system, Táchira and Mérida were dominated by the Christian Democrats of COPEI. Their Acción Democrática (AD) rivals were more powerful towards the east, and around Bolívar and the Federal District. The PSUV never really established a foothold in those western areas; to some extent it was less interested in doing so than in consolidating its base in the urban heartlands further east. Those Andean states were always considered to be quite remote from the PSUV's perspective. The failure of the PSUV to put down roots in this region left a vacuum that allowed it to become a stronghold of the opposition.

It contained some important university towns with large numbers of young people who were never really incorporated into the PSUV or the Chavista project. This is an area where the Chavista government was very concerned about ties between Colombia's right-wing paramilitaries and the opposition, and a thriving cross-border trade in smuggled goods. The Colombian border has been subject to periodic closures, but it covers such an immense territory that the Venezuelan authorities can't patrol it to the extent that they need to, and the Colombians have other priorities than the smuggling of goods across the border.

The Maduro government's heavy defeat was obviously related to the economic crisis that Venezuela is going through. What are the main features of that crisis?

The collapse in global oil prices has been devastating for Venezuela. Oil revenues account for approximately 95 per cent of export earnings, 60 per cent of budget revenues and 12 per cent of GDP. The country's economy was thus overwhelmingly reliant on income from this sector, which the Chavistas had used to fund ambitious social programmes at a time when prices were consistently high in the mid 2000s. The fall in the oil price has been compounded by a decline in production levels; Venezuela's oil export income fell by 40 per cent in 2015. The foreign-debt burden is substantial, having risen from \$37 billion in 1998 to an estimated \$123 billion in 2016, and the government is struggling to cover the cost of repayments. Drought has exacerbated problems linked to under-investment in the nationalized energy sector, causing severe blackouts and shortages in the country, which is dependent on hydro-electric power for 70 per cent of its energy needs.

To add to this myriad of troubles, a system of exchange-rate and price controls that was originally imposed to deal with economic sabotage by the opposition in 2002–03 has remained in place and become profoundly dysfunctional. The official three-tier exchange rate between the bolívar, Venezuela's national currency, and the US dollar bears no relation to the black-market rate. Food, medicine and basic household goods are difficult to obtain at government-controlled prices; citizens must spend hours queuing, or resort to the black market, where the same goods can be obtained at a huge mark-up. The brunt of this crisis has been borne by the popular classes who supported Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro in the past. Maduro and his allies accuse the opposition

of engaging in ‘economic warfare’ and blame them for the crisis. The widespread defection of PSUV supporters in the 2015 election suggests they have lost patience with that line of argument.

In historical perspective, there would seem to be a parallel between the arc traced by Chavismo in power and that of the AD governments led by Carlos Andrés Pérez in the 1970s and 80s—oil-price boom, large-scale investment in public services, followed by a collapse in the price of oil, inflation, capital flight, corruption, impoverishment and social unrest. What differences would you see between the two regimes?

There certainly are strong parallels—particularly in terms of the degree of control over *Petróles de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, which was first nationalized in the 1970s, increasing the state’s capacity to extract revenues from the oil industry. By the time Chávez came to power, PDVSA had gained significant autonomy—he called it a ‘state within a state’—but his government then brought the company back under its authority by changing the constitution and the hydrocarbons law. PDVSA had to dedicate a significant part of what would formerly have been investment revenue to the government and Chavista social programmes in the form of royalties, taxes and dividends. In 2011, for example, this totalled \$49 billion. By 2014 that figure had increased to \$57 billion, which was divided between the Treasury, the National Development Fund and government programmes. One major difference was that Carlos Andrés Pérez invested heavily in developing Venezuela’s manufacturing base, hoping to wean the country off its dependence on imports. The Chávez government followed a different approach: rather than investing in heavy industry, it concentrated on small and medium enterprises—family-run businesses, the cooperative sector. Andrés Pérez did put a lot of money into health and education; there were some fairly significant advances during that period, leaving quite an impressive—but, like that of Chávez, ultimately unsustainable—legacy. However, far more resources were dedicated to social programmes under Chávez than had been the case under Andrés Pérez, with the Chávez government inheriting grave problems of poverty, inequality and social marginalization.

How would you periodize the Chávez era?

When Chávez first came to power in 1999, he saw himself as very much a ‘Third Way’ leader: there was an orientation towards figures like

Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens. He was also strongly influenced by a nationalist, Bolivarian heritage that was quite specific to Venezuela, and by the experience and limitations of the old Punto Fijo system that had governed the country since 1958. What Chávez actually sought to achieve during his early years in office, between the election of 1998 and the attempted coup four years later, was remarkably modest. I certainly don't accept the view in much of the recent literature on Venezuela that Chávez was always a dedicated Castroite, bent on carrying out a Marxist revolution. I think he saw himself as a democratic socialist, who wanted to build a participatory democracy, institute a basic welfare system, and address Venezuela's chronic social problems. There was also an initial emphasis on diversifying the economy away from dependence on oil, by stimulating the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Those ambitions were modest by European standards, but immediately set off alarm bells in Washington.¹

Things changed dramatically after the coup attempt of 2002. The government realized that it had underestimated the virulence of the opposition, and began to invest more time, effort and money in consolidating its support among the popular classes. That turn coincided with a strong increase in the oil price after 2004, so the Chavistas were well positioned to deliver real benefits to their core bloc of supporters. At the same time, the international context began to shift. The Bush Administration was preoccupied with Iraq and the Middle East; China and Russia were reaching out to new international trading partners; and left-leaning presidents began taking power elsewhere in Latin America—Lula in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina, Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador. Chávez became far more active on the international stage, realizing that Venezuela needed to insulate itself from US pressure and forge regional alliances. Thanks to the oil price, they were able to create new organizations such as PetroCaribe and ALBA and fund regional initiatives like Telesur and Banco de Sur. In the run-up to the presidential election of 2006, Chávez spoke for the first time of building 'twenty-first century socialism', so there was a clear radicalization. Those four years between 2002 and 2006 were crucial: it was a period when some of the most progressive aspects of the Chávez government were set in place, such as the ambitious social policy agenda of the *Misiones*, and the construction of a new 'geometry of power' built up

¹ For an account of the Chávez government until 2003, see Gregory Wilpert, 'Collision in Venezuela', *NLR* 21, May–June 2003.

around communal councils and cooperatives. But these measures were not institutionalized; instead, they operated as a parallel state, financed by the unchecked distribution of petrodollars—which in turn made them unsustainable and vulnerable to retrenchment.

That radicalization had popular support—Chávez won by a landslide in 2006, taking 63 per cent of the vote on a 75 per cent turnout?

To an extent. I would argue that after the election of 2006, the government moved into a third phase, characterized by growing state intervention in the economy and greater intolerance of internal ideological pluralism. The Chavista project became much more focused on nationalization, and far more dependent on oil-export revenues. Any pretence of building up the non-oil sector of the economy was abandoned. The nationalization process initially focused on key sectors of the economy, such as electricity and telecommunications, but then became more sporadic and *ad hoc*. The government never really had a strategy for managing the newly nationalized industries and distribution chains, or the huge liabilities it was taking on. That opened up schisms on the left as well: groups such as Marea Socialista argued for worker management of the new industries, but that's not what happened. Instead, the government sought to manage them centrally, through the state, with the Labour Ministry hostile to the trade unions taking control of those nationalized sectors. All kinds of divisions emerged within the Chavista movement. Many of the intellectuals who had supported Chávez became disaffected, because they thought the government was repeating the mistakes of the past and not addressing problems of corruption and insecurity. Social organizations became disaffected with a perceived shift away from participatory democracy and towards a greater degree of centralization and localized PSUV control; the left polarized around the question of state management vs. worker management. In 2007, Chávez brought forward a very ambitious and complicated programme of constitutional reform, which was narrowly defeated—the first defeat that he had suffered at the ballot box since 1998. It seemed that much of the Chavista base was confused and unsure about the political direction that the government was taking. Debate inside the PSUV was limited, with ideological but not policy leadership filtering downwards from Chávez.

Chávez was always something of an intellectual magpie, who would pick up new ideas and run with them. At that point, he appeared to see the

world as being full of infinite possibilities, with the oil price, the growing relationship with China and the perceived decline of US power. But I don't think that mood was underpinned by the kind of strategic vision that was necessary to advance this model of twenty-first century socialism in Venezuela. It seemed to be quite an inchoate and eclectic set of ideas that were never put in a solid institutional framework. At the same time, many vestiges and cultures of the old Punto Fijo regime went unaddressed. Throughout the lifetime of the Chávez government, there was a constant turnover of personnel at the highest level. When a minister was removed from office, as happened frequently, it wouldn't just be a case of one individual departing. They would take all of their cadre with them. As a result, there was no continuity of policy, with a constant cycle of new plans and strategic visions being unveiled every couple of years, but a lack of technical and administrative capacity for implementation.

One striking weakness of 'twenty-first century socialism' was that it didn't appear to have a strong analysis of twenty-first century capitalism—how Venezuelan capitalism actually operated, which capitalists owned what and so on.

There was no serious critique of the Venezuelan economy, which is fundamentally a rentier economy based on oil. A small group of very wealthy families have dominated Venezuela for the last century, and they did a remarkably good job of insulating themselves from the Bolivarian Revolution. Some of their property was nationalized, but for the most part it was the assets of foreign investors that were targeted. That social layer is so dominant that you either have to reach an accommodation with them or else nationalize—you can't take a middle path, which is what Chávez and later Maduro effectively did.

The nationalizations appear to have been quite limited, is that correct?

In fact, there were a lot of companies taken into state ownership, but they varied in size: some of them were just individual factories and mills. Often the government was responding to immediate pressure from workers, without having an overall strategic plan. Once they nationalized those firms, there was no follow-up investment, so it was very difficult to keep them ticking over. Sometimes the nationalized enterprises were handed over to cooperatives which lacked the skills and experience to run them properly. Another big problem was that the government never

really developed systems for distribution. This is a country with a very poor road network, and the haulage companies were still controlled by the powerful family-based oligarchies. There was also a shortage of good technical cadres, which has always been a weakness for Venezuela. Remarkably, it doesn't have a single university which specializes in the training of oil geologists, engineers and other technicians. In the health service, they relied upon the Cubans to supply the doctors; most of the Venezuelan doctors who had been trained in Europe or the US didn't return to the country. The Bolivarian University initiative, which was initially a welcome expansion of access to education, did not connect teaching and training to the needs of society and the economy.

The economic picture was still relatively good as Chávez began his second term, although there were major structural challenges. But then they made the old mistake of borrowing heavily when oil prices were high, and gradually overextending themselves. Chávez and key figures in PDVSA and the energy ministry began to argue that the whole notion of a 'resource curse' was a myth: how could it possibly be a curse to have such abundant commodity resources? They thought they could use OPEC to lift oil prices and keep them sustainably high. Nobody anticipated then the huge increase in US domestic energy capacity, which has made it effectively self-sufficient, or the slowdown in the Chinese economy.

Venezuela's economic decline began while Chávez was president. There was a contraction in 2009, followed by a recession the next year. The rectification measures that were taken at that point were actually understood as deepening the measures that had previously been taken: extending price controls, enforcing the exchange rate more rigorously, borrowing overseas, and keeping the bolívar very high against the dollar, when there should have been a devaluation. They also preserved many of the regressive universal subsidies, such as the annual \$15 billion that kept the domestic gasoline price ultra-low, at just \$0.01 a litre, to the benefit of the car-owning middle classes. There was no attempt to rein in expenditure, and when the electoral period of 2012-13 approached, the government announced some big spending increases that weren't properly targeted or sustainable. Not for the first time, investment revenues were taken out of PDVSA, limiting its capacity to increase production.

Where did the borrowed money go?

Part of it was spent on social programmes, and on nationalizations. They also had to deal with some very expensive arbitration cases arising from the nationalization of companies. But it's difficult to say, because Venezuela's accounting procedures are so opaque. There were problems of waste and profligacy, and no real monitoring or evaluation of the *Misiones* and the social policy initiatives. The opposition would claim that a lot of the money has gone straight into the back pockets of government officials. We may see some shocking revelations if and when the Chavistas are removed from office. Chávez and Maduro both promised to launch anti-corruption drives, but nothing was really done. A lot of the rumours are linked to contracting deals with foreign companies from China, Russia or Iran: great plans were drawn up, and money paid, for houses, hotels and factories that were never delivered. There was a vast haemorrhage of resources from every pore of the Venezuelan state, because there was no oversight or accountability.

That's damning.

Yes. Although this is a long-running problem in Venezuela: it's not something that was new to the Chavistas.

After Chávez went through his first health scare with cancer, the question of who his successor would be came to the fore. Who were the principal candidates, and how did Nicolás Maduro prevail over the rest?

Maduro almost seemed to come from nowhere. He hadn't been an especially dynamic or effective PSUV leader or foreign minister. Apart from Maduro, the most significant candidate was Diosdado Cabello, who had been the president of the National Assembly and was considered a vital bridge between Chávez and the military. There was a lot of talk about Cabello standing in for Chávez when he was sick. But there was also a sense that the nominee had to reach out to all parts of the Chavista coalition: the popular classes, the trade unions, social organizations, intellectuals, as well as the military. Maduro came from a union background. He was also much closer to the Cubans than Cabello was.

Would Cabello have made a better president?

The real challenge at that point was wider than the question of individuals. The Chavista movement had been in power for more than a decade,

and they were increasingly losing touch with a new demographic cohort who had come of age since 1998. Many people had been alienated by the direction taken in 2006, but there was no scope for them to re-examine or redefine what Chavismo stood for at that time. The movement was still dominated by men who tended to be quite individualistic figures rather than broad coalition-builders. The best approach would have been to open up the succession through some kind of internal primary, rather than allowing Chávez to decide who would replace him. That put an awful lot of pressure on Maduro; it stifled debate inside the party, and obstructed the renewal that was necessary.

What was the internal culture of the PSUV at this point?

It was fragmented and factionalized along the same lines as the wider Chavista movement. There was little sense of critical debate among party supporters—something that was strongly criticized by left-wing activists around the website *Aporrea*. There had been an initial surge of participation when the party was founded, with millions of people signing up as members, but that enthusiasm gradually waned. They did move towards primaries and gender quotas for the 2015 elections, but the PSUV never really took shape as a democratic party in the way that people had expected it to. The primaries have ended up being more like a caucus system: elections to a committee, which then elects another committee, which chooses the candidate. It remains the largest political party in Venezuela today, and quite an effective electoral machine, but popular engagement with the PSUV doesn't really translate into influence over Maduro.

How has Maduro's record in power differed from that of Chávez?

The most important difference is that Maduro has been governing in a manifestly different economic context, a period of rapid economic decline. With the loss of oil revenue, the money is no longer there to pay for initiatives like ALBA or PetroCaribe. Maduro also inherited many problems from the Chávez administration that he simply hasn't addressed. The exchange-rate and price controls have remained in place and generated huge problems. They could have moved to straighten out the complexities of the exchange-rate system, which has three different tiers. Even a serious devaluation of the currency would have stabilized the fiscal position to a considerable extent. There were high expectations

when Maduro took office that there would be some kind of major economic-policy shift, but that never came. It's extraordinary how little has been done to address these grave dysfunctionalities. This has been the most astonishingly static government Latin America has seen for many years. There is a whole group of people in charge of managing the economy, but nobody has overall control.

That was one of the main critical points made by Jorge Giordani after he was removed as planning minister for the second time in 2014: there is no coherence or direction in economic policy, and certain people have interests in various aspects of that policy continuing to follow the same path. They retain the price controls in the hope of maintaining popular access to foodstuffs, but the effect has simply been to fuel a gigantic black market, which is now pervasive across Venezuelan society. If you live in one of the regions bordering Colombia, you can fill a lorry with subsidized rice or flour, drive it across the border and make a profit of several thousand per cent. The Chavistas have created an economic system which makes participation in the black-market economy essential for survival.

The price controls operate through government supermarkets?

Yes, but they also try to impose those controls on local shops, and at rural farmers' markets. That's why people aren't taking goods to market, because they won't get the value of their chicken or their eggs. That contributes to food shortages. The pharmaceutical sector has been nationalized, but once again, there has been no follow-up strategy for supply and distribution. The result has simply been to maintain price controls on a reduced quantity of available goods. The scarcity index is now estimated to be in the region of 80 per cent, so all basic services and goods are in short supply. People are struggling financially, finding it hard to obtain loans or keep up with basic expenses, and much of their time is spent trying to obtain scarce goods. Inflation is sky-high: the IMF predicts that it will be over 700 per cent this year. Venezuelan government officials used to say that the shortage of dollars was not a problem for them, since it was only the wealthy class that needed dollars. But the lack of dollars has become so chronic that it has undermined all economic capacity—especially the capacity to import. The overall picture is one of profound economic insecurity, with the popular classes hit hardest.

How serious is the problem of violent crime, and what explains it?

This is something that goes back a long time—just like the blight of corruption. Venezuela has the second highest homicide rate in Latin America, surpassed only by Honduras. The victims and perpetrators are both overwhelmingly young men. In many communities, social identities, power and influence are configured around participation in criminal activity. There was a huge mistake made in the 1990s, at a time when the World Bank and the IMF were pressuring Latin American countries to decentralize their police forces. Police reform in Venezuela put the local forces under the control of state governors, and they became localized armies for regional strongmen. The police were badly paid, small arms were in wide circulation, and the wealthy classes began to pay for their own security—a luxury that the poor couldn't afford. That was the picture when Chávez first became president, and he said at the time that addressing violent crime would be a priority for his government, but it never was. Efforts to recentralize the police force were strongly resisted by governors and the right-wing opposition, who claimed that Chávez was trying to concentrate power in his own hands. The police remained fragmented, new layers of authority were created that simply shuffled the problem around, and there was no continuity at the interior ministry, with a constant turnover of personnel. Unless you have a police force that commands broad-based popular legitimacy, you won't be able to establish the rule of law. The catastrophic situation in the prisons has not been addressed: they remain dirty, overcrowded and inhumane, with many people held in pre-trial detention for lengthy periods of time. The judiciary is underfunded, and there are massive backlogs in the whole legal process. Chávez inherited the problem, but unfortunately it has gotten worse.

Has PDVSA been able to maintain levels of production?

The latest report suggests that they've hit a fifteen-year low. The oil sector is in a terrible mess. Part of the problem is caused by the current drought, which means they don't have the full hydroelectric capacity they need to extract the oil. Even when they can get the oil out of the ground, the refining process is a challenge, because Venezuela's oil is a very thick, heavy crude, which has to be mixed with light oil imported from the US. PDVSA has two huge repayments of bonds coming up in the autumn, amounting to \$5 billion, on top of government debt repayments of almost \$20 billion over the next eighteen months.

The crisis of the government has been paralleled by a revival of the Venezuelan opposition, which was in such disarray after the 2006 elections. It was striking that students appeared to be the first to take up the banner of opposition in recent years.

The traditional parties, AD and COPEI, had effectively disintegrated, so the initiative passed to non-party forces, such as the media and the student groups, to challenge the government. Student activists received generous funding from Washington through the National Endowment for Democracy and USAID, in line with a general strategy to finance youth movements around the world. That has allowed some of the student groups to by-pass the stage of mobilizing and consulting with people in Venezuela or embedding themselves properly in the local context. They were able to sustain activities and protests that wouldn't have been possible without that external support.

One of the big mistakes that the Chávez and Maduro administrations made was to ignore the social-media revolution. Venezuela has one of the highest rates of mobile-phone ownership in Latin America, but when things like WhatsApp and Twitter and Snapchat took off, the government just didn't have a social-media strategy to counter the online presence of the student activists. That allowed them to disseminate some outrageous falsehoods about what was happening in Venezuela: claims that students were being raped by the police, and horrific images that later turned out to have been taken from protests in other countries. It was a huge error to neglect the field of social media, because there have now been seventeen years of Chavismo, and young people clearly don't remember what the pre-Chávez period was like.

What is the balance of forces in the opposition MUD alliance? Does it represent a new political generation?

The groups that have rallied behind the MUD range in ideological terms from the moderate left to the far right, which makes for a good deal of incoherence. The main organizations are Primero Justicia (PJ) and Voluntad Popular (VP), along with the old AD party. The PJ cadre would have been a new generation twenty years ago: they were people who had been alienated from the leadership of COPEI in the 1990s, so they split off to form their own party. The leadership consists of men like Henrique Capriles and Julio Borges, who both read law and studied in

the United States, and seemed to have a bright and wonderful future ahead of them in Venezuelan politics before they were steamrolled by Chavismo. VP is led by Leopoldo López, who is currently in prison, and stands further to the right. The big rivalry is between Capriles and the Harvard-educated López: two men from wealthy families, who would both like to put themselves in position to become the next president.

They also seem to have distinct strategies, or political styles at any rate.

They do, or at least they did. López was always much more confrontational and more focused on street mobilization. He has never accepted the legitimacy of the government and has concentrated on soliciting external intervention against Venezuela. His wife, Lilian Tintori, has travelled around the world on his behalf, working closely with Thor Halvorssen—a cousin of López, and the head of an organization called the Oslo Freedom Foundation, which along with Human Rights Watch and the media has promoted a narrative of human rights suppression in Venezuela. Capriles, on the other hand, was much more internally focused. He challenged Chávez for the presidency in 2012 and ran a very good campaign. Chávez still won by a clear margin—over 10 per cent—but his majority wasn't as big as it had been in 2006. During that campaign, Capriles spoke about reconciliation and the need for national unity; he mobilized in the *barrios* and the traditional Chavista heartlands, promising to maintain the social programmes and comparing himself to Lula in Brazil (much to Lula's annoyance). Capriles ran against Maduro the following year, and only fell short by a couple of hundred thousand votes. But after losing two presidential elections, his position has been weakened.

Who organized the protests of 2013–14?

Capriles called for demonstrations immediately after the presidential election in 2013, because the result had been so close. There were claims that the vote had been manipulated, without any real evidence. Eight people were killed in those protests—all government supporters. López then accused Capriles of conceding defeat too easily. He and Voluntad Popular wanted to keep the momentum of street protests and mobilization against the government going, so that fed into the student demonstrations of February 2014, which were externally funded and whipped up by López, his ally María Corina Machado, and the mayor of

Caracas, Antonio Ledezma. There were forty-seven people killed during those riots in 2014, when opposition supporters were doing things like stringing wire across streets to decapitate pro-government motorcyclists. Leopoldo López explicitly called on the students to come out on the streets to demonstrate and bring down the government. When he was arrested and sent to prison, he claimed that he had never called for them to overthrow the government, in spite of the overwhelming video evidence of his statements.

At the time it seemed quite surprising that Maduro's government managed to sit out the protests. How important were counter-mobilizations?

Many people were reluctant to get involved in those counter-mobilizations, because the levels of violence were very frightening. Maduro was hesitant to deploy the security forces in too heavy-handed a fashion because he was so fresh in his post, and his credibility had been undermined by his narrow victory in 2013. The balance between Maduro and the military was just being worked out at that point. When he did call in the security forces, they cleared the streets quite rapidly as the popular appetite for sustaining the protests waned. That's the problem with mobilizations of that kind: unless they topple a government rather quickly, they inevitably peter out, and that was what happened in 2014.

What was the balance-sheet for the opposition from the protests? Did they pave the way for its victory in 2015?

I would say the legacy was remarkably neutral. The most important consequence was that López ended up in prison, but that has allowed him to present himself as a martyr to the ghastly totalitarianism of Venezuela. It accentuated discord within the MUD. But overall, it was a tremendous, unnecessary waste of lives and property.

Does the initiative now lie with López or Capriles in the opposition? What is the opposition trying to do with its parliamentary majority?

The new president of the National Assembly, Henry Ramos Allup, comes from neither Primero Justicia nor Voluntad Popular, but from the old AD party. His nomination for the role was quite extraordinary: if ever there was a discredited individual who symbolized the failures of the old Punto Fijo system, it was Ramos Allup. The different MUD parties stand

on their own tickets, sometimes against each other. The main rivalry has pitted Voluntad Popular against Primero Justicia, and there was an alliance of sorts between VP and AD, which accounts for Ramos Allup becoming assembly president. Primero Justicia is the largest single party, followed by AD, with Voluntad Popular quite low down—primarily because it's not really a national movement; its base is concentrated in Miranda and Caracas.

The MUD initially had a super-majority in the assembly, but that hinged on the support of three members who came from indigenous communities. It was then shown that those representatives had been heavily implicated in electoral fraud, along with a PSUV member, so all four were disbarred. That denied the MUD a super-majority, but they still have a commanding majority of seats. The great tragedy of their electoral success is that they have been single-mindedly focused on dismantling everything that has gone before, and they have adopted a confrontational posture ever since assuming power. Capriles had spoken of the need for dialogue, but then found himself isolated within the MUD, because Voluntad Popular and AD would not countenance any kind of negotiation with the government. As a result, he quickly backtracked. Having previously distanced himself from violent mobilizations against the government, Capriles has become more radical, in a bid to stop the old centre ground from coalescing around López. He is now the one urging more street protests, and even calling for the army to overthrow the government.

Has the opposition concentrated on securing the release of López from prison?

At first that was very nearly their sole demand. They introduced an amnesty law in April which was quite extraordinary, going completely against the grain of how we understand transitional justice. It granted absolution for any political crime dating back to 1998, including terrorism, drug trafficking and attempts to overthrow the elected government. It was designed for the benefit of a small group, fewer than fifty people, who were serving sentences for those political crimes. The law was rejected by the Supreme Court. The whole approach of the opposition has been so confrontational and out of touch with popular concerns. Ordinary Venezuelans want to see concrete measures to address crime and insecurity, and to alleviate the economic crisis. Instead, the opposition has spent months debating how they can get López out of prison,

and what is the most appropriate strategy for ousting Maduro. The only real way to address shortages or any of the other serious problems Venezuela currently has is through dialogue. The solutions proposed by the opposition to deal with the economic decline are based on liberalization and resort to the IMF—something that has absolutely no traction within Venezuelan society, and which has alienated a lot of people. That helps explain why Maduro still retains the support of approximately one quarter of the population, in spite of the catastrophic economic situation: they believe they have more to lose if the opposition takes power than if Maduro stays on.

Yet Maduro appears to be squeezing the budget to pay foreign creditors, Ceaușescu-style, while the situation in the country is desperate—people queuing from four in the morning to buy basic goods that never arrive.

Neither the opposition nor the government is willing to contemplate a default on the national debt. Venezuela is heavily indebted to China, and the Chinese would not want to see them default; it would also shut the country out of international lending markets for years to come. The nature of Venezuela's consolidated debt is quite complicated, so one of the major concerns is that, in the event of a default, there would be moves by debt holders to secure a freeze of Venezuelan assets abroad, which would be a big problem for the oil sector in particular. We have no clear figures for how much is being paid out in interest payments, because of the lack of proper national statistics, but international reserves amount to \$13 billion, with \$20 billion in debt repayments coming up, on top of the \$5 billion owed by PDVSA. They will continue to tread water as long as they can, but the situation is not looking good.

What steps have the opposition taken towards calling a recall referendum on Maduro?

There were three planks to their strategy for ousting Maduro: popular protests, a constitutional amendment and the recall referendum. Protests have been ongoing, but with fluctuating levels of support, and the Supreme Court has rejected the possibility of amending the constitution, so the MUD's primary focus has been the recall option. Strictly speaking, they needed just under 200,000 signatures, but they wanted the symbolic value of a much larger number, and claimed to have collected at least two million signatures. That backfired to some extent, as

the electoral commission found 600,000 signatures to be fraudulent. For his part, Maduro issued a statement claiming that there would be no referendum, which undermined the authority of the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE). The opposition claims that the CNE is just a government mouthpiece, but in fact it is probably one of the few remaining independent vestiges of the Venezuelan state, with a good record of supervising elections and a high level of technical competence. It was wrong for Maduro to question the CNE's prerogatives, because they are the ones who should determine whether there is a referendum or not, after examining the signatures. It may have been a deliberately provocative negotiating tactic, so that he could later concede over the issue and look like an exemplary democrat. The CNE has now sent out the signatures for verification, and aims to complete the process by the end of July. Maduro has also tried to claim that the opposition has missed its opportunity to call a referendum, on the basis that his term really began in January 2013, when Chávez became ill, so the mid-term deadline has already expired. If the Supreme Court was to back that position against the CNE's ruling, we would be facing constitutional meltdown.

If and when the referendum is called, in order for Maduro to be removed from office, more people have to vote against him than backed him in April 2013. He received 3.7 million votes that time, so there will have to be at least 3.7 million voting to oust him. In that case, there would be fresh presidential elections. But if the referendum is not held before January 2017, in the event of Maduro being defeated, the remainder of his term would have to be completed by the Vice-President, Aristóbulo Istúriz. Istúriz comes from a background in the Venezuelan left and was mayor of Caracas. Some observers believe that the military would prefer that outcome, because Istúriz is considered more capable and consensus-oriented than Maduro. If we do go to a recall referendum, many people in the PSUV and the military will be reluctant to get behind Maduro, because they see him as a liability. But with the opposition threatening to prosecute government figures, at this point none of them have any real incentive to break with Maduro in public.

What happens if the opposition doesn't get enough votes to oust Maduro?

In that case, he would carry on, but as a lame duck. You can already sense power slipping away from Maduro. The question that would arise

for the PSUV would be finding the next potential candidate, which is likely to pose some grave problems. Chávez held together a very eclectic movement, which has already dissipated and fragmented. We may be looking at a long period of time in the wilderness for Chavismo if Maduro is defeated in a recall vote or the next presidential election. It's hard to think of a strong PSUV candidate, but on the other hand, the MUD is riddled with conflicts about who their champion should be: if Capriles is the candidate in a new election, López will work against him, and vice versa. So we face the prospect of complete political fragmentation. That is one of the main reasons for the growth of the 'ni-ni' phenomenon—Venezuelans who support neither the government nor the opposition. We can trace its roots back to 2007, when there was a high abstention rate on the constitutional referendum that led to it failing. So much of the Western media coverage of Venezuela has presented the people who voted for Chávez in the most insulting terms, as ignorant and blindly loyal to their leader. In fact, Venezuelan voters have always been very sophisticated and careful about who they give their support to. At this point, fifty per cent of the population are estimated to lie in the 'ni-ni' camp.

The opposition is so truculent that they won't accept anyone as a mediator for negotiations, and that will lose them electoral support. One figure who could play the role of consensus-builder would be Henri Falcón, the governor of Lara state. Falcón was a Chávez supporter and a member of his party, but later broke with him to support the MUD. He also has a military background. Falcón is not vengeful in the way that much of the opposition leaders are, and his efforts to set out a middle-ground position between the government and the MUD could give the PSUV leadership the confidence they need to step down. At the moment, too many of them have a vested interest in keeping Maduro in power, because they face the risk of being put on trial if he is forced from office by the right wing of the MUD.

Deservedly so in some cases, to judge by what you have told us.

Probably so, but having said that, I would not expect the opposition to be especially keen on the rule of law.

Do you think the military will play a role in this transition?

It would be a mistake to see the military as a unified actor, but I would say its majority sentiment is still with the government. If anything, their leading figures appear to be quite frustrated that Maduro has betrayed the legacy of Chávez. The military establishment has a large stake in the economy, with its own TV station and its own production and distribution networks. Maduro has granted them a new mining concession, and the army is providing security in some of the key mining areas, where violence is widespread. When Capriles urged the army to step in and remove Maduro, you had to wonder what he was thinking, because the last thing they would want to do is to hand over power to Capriles or López. They would be more likely to try and revert back to the Bolivarian path which Maduro has failed to uphold. For the opposition to call for military intervention is utterly reckless, even suicidal—but then again, they have rarely been known for their astute political reasoning.

How does the regional picture affect the situation in Venezuela?

The Organization of American States (OAS) general secretary, Uruguay's Luis Almagro, recently called for Venezuela to be suspended from its Democratic Charter, but he hadn't consulted properly with the member states and the move backfired. Almagro had been working closely with Lilian Tintori and other supporters of López, who have done a very good job of tapping up ex-presidents in Latin America such as Vicente Fox—any former leader with a dreadful human rights record appears to have aligned themselves with the López campaign. The post-coup government in Paraguay is very close to the Venezuelan opposition: they gave María Corina Machado their seat at the OAS last year so that she could denounce Maduro. There has been a swing to the right on the continent, with the victory of Macri in Argentina and the events in Brazil. The regional dynamics are changing, and not to the benefit of Maduro. But surprisingly, Brazil and Argentina both came out in favour of negotiation and dialogue in Venezuela and did not support the move to suspend it from the OAS. Macri's foreign minister, Susana Malcorra, has ambitions to be UN secretary-general, so that may have been a factor.

Colombia's president Juan Manuel Santos has also been quite circumspect. He is focused on the peace process with the FARC, which is at a very delicate stage, and he recognizes the debt which that process owes to Venezuela. A big concern for Santos would be that if Maduro is ousted by force—as his great rival Alvaro Uribe is urging—it would destabilize

Venezuela and open up a space across the border for anyone dissatisfied with the Colombian peace settlement, especially from the guerrillas. The US government appears to have the same concerns as Santos about destabilization, and John Kerry has put out a statement calling for dialogue between the government and the opposition. That is one major difference between Brazil and Venezuela: if Maduro was removed from power in defiance of constitutional procedures, his supporters might very well turn to weapons, or the military would step in. If there was a recall referendum that followed the correct procedures, that would reduce the prospect of violence.

How would you assess the legacy of Latin America's left turn over the last decade and a half?

It has been a revolutionary period, when people who had always been excluded finally had a voice and the opportunity to access power. Over the last century of Latin American politics, the left has consistently been kept out of government by US-backed military interventions. This was the first time that left-wing movements were able to exercise power throughout the region for so long. The popular classes have become much more conscious of their rights and their potential strength than they had been before. Those rights are no longer seen as something handed down to the masses from above by charismatic leaders, as was the case with an earlier generation of populists like Perón and Vargas. The Bolivarian Revolution in particular has transformed social relations in Venezuela and had a huge impact on the continent as a whole. But the tragedy is that it was never properly institutionalized and thus proved to be unsustainable.