

Ongoing crisis in Venezuela

By Nisan Kassam

HRWF (12.06.2017) - For the past ten weeks, Venezuelans have taken the streets to protest for the ouster of President Nicolás Maduro. The country is facing the worst crisis in its history, with an inflation rate expected to reach 720.5% this year¹, a homicide rate of 91,8 per 100,000 inhabitants, and shortages of basic goods, including medications and medical supplies.

On March 21, the National Assembly passed a draft resolution to support the application of the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) to Venezuela. The National Assembly was responding to the declarations of Luis Almagro, OAS Secretary General, who claimed that Venezuela "is in violation of every article of the Inter-American Democratic Charter²." Consequently, on March 30, Venezuela's Supreme Court decreed that it would usurp the functions of the opposition-majority National Assembly, sparking the first round of demonstrations against the regime of Nicolás Maduro. The following day, Luisa Ortega Díaz, Attorney-General of Venezuela and a long-time Chávez's sympathizer, declared the "rupture of the constitutional order" in the country. On April 4th, the Court overturned the section of the ruling in which it would arrogate the powers of the elected National Assembly. It did not, however, overturn the section of the sentence in which it accuses opposition deputies of treason; or, the section in which the Constitutional Court holds the power to negotiate the creation of mixed-enterprises³, a function that corresponds to the National Assembly, according to Article 150 of the Constitution⁴. Furthermore, on another attempt to silence the opposition, on April 7, Henrique Capriles Radonski (one of the main opposition leaders) was banned from participating in politics for fifteen years for alleged "administrative irregularities⁵". And more recently, Mr. Capriles had his passport seized by the authorities when he was expected to travel for a meeting with Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights⁶.

More recently, Mr. Maduro has called for the formation of an assembly to rewrite the Venezuelan Constitution, which was reformed by former president Hugo Chávez in 1999. Half of the assembly would be composed of members elected by organizations, such as peasant movements and trade unions. And, the other half would be elected at the municipal

¹ Venezuela: What is happening today? *Al Jazeera*
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/venezuela-happening-170412114045595.html>

² Venezuela's Congress Supports Application of OAS Democratic Charter. *Medium*
<https://medium.com/vz-dispatch/venezuelas-congress-supports-application-of-oas-democratic-charter-733f10cd8920>

³ ¿Qué dicen las sentencias 157 Y 158 del TSJ? *Prodavinci*
<http://prodavinci.com/blogs/que-dicen-las-sentencias-157-y-158-del-tsj-por-jose-ignacio-hernandez-g/>

⁴ *Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela.*
<http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Venezuela/ven1999.html>

⁵ Venezuela opposition leader Capriles banned from politics. *BBC News.*
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39534732>

⁶ Venezuela protests: Passport of opposition leader Capriles 'seized'. *BBC News*
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39970703>

level (such elections are expected to take place on July 30⁷). According to Phil Gunson, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group, the constituent assembly “would have supra-constitutional powers that would allow it to dissolve parliament, restructure the state and even govern the country indefinitely, if it so chose, without any need to hold fresh elections⁸.”

Eleven countries from the Latin American region, including Argentina, Mexico, and Uruguay, have urged President Maduro to guarantee the right to peaceful demonstrations⁹. Similarly, the European Union has called on the government to restore the democratic order and to free all political prisoners¹⁰. The United States has imposed sanctions on several Venezuelan government officials, including Vice-President Tareck al-Aissami, who has been accused for his involvement in the trafficking of narcotics¹¹. The Government of Maduro claimed that such declarations interfere with the sovereignty of Venezuela. Furthermore, on late April, the government initiated its official withdrawal from the OAS¹².

Despite the violence with which government forces and paramilitary groups have attacked demonstrators, the opposition has called on protesters to remain on the streets demanding general elections, respect for the separation of powers, the opening of a humanitarian channel and the release of political prisoners. Since April 1st, 72 Venezuelans¹³ have lost their lives, over 1,000 have been injured¹⁴, and more than 2,990 have been detained (out of which over 1,251 remain arrested) as a result of the protests¹⁵. The Venezuelan Penal Forum, a Non-Governmental Organization operating in Venezuela, declared that the number of political prisoners has increased to 290 (on April of 2013, when Maduro took

⁷ Venezuela celebrará elecciones a la Asamblea Constituyente el 30 de julio. *El País*
http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2017/06/06/america/1496704004_426454.html

⁸ Venezuela: A blueprint for strife. *International Crisis Group*.
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/venezuela-blueprint-strife>

⁹ Llamam 11 países de América a Maduro garantizar derecho de manifestación. *Jornada*
<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/ultimas/2017/04/18/llaman-11-paises-de-america-a-maduro-garantizar-derecho-de-manifestacion>

¹⁰ EP urges Venezuela to restore democratic order and free all political prisoners. *European Parliament*
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170424IPR72038/ep-urges-venezuela-to-restore-democratic-order-and-free-all-political-prisoners>

¹¹ U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Venezuela's Vice President, Calling Him a Drug 'Kingpin'. *The New York Times*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/13/world/americas/venezuela-vice-president-sanctions-trump.html>

¹² Venezuela: Portazo a la OEA. *Revista Semana*
<http://www.semana.com/mundo/articulo/venezuela-se-retira-de-la-oea/523611>

¹³ Cronología: 72 muertos en protestas en Venezuela hasta el 07 de junio. *El Nacional*.
http://www.el-nacional.com/noticias/sociedad/cronologia-muertos-protestas-venezuela-hasta-junio_182987

¹⁴ La fiscal general de Venezuela discrepa con el Gobierno sobre las muertes en las protestas. *El País*
http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2017/05/25/america/1495665370_285839.html

¹⁵ Reporte sobre la represión en Venezuela durante manifestaciones en mayo 2017. *Foro Penal Venezolano*
<https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://foropenal.com/sites/default/files/INFORME%2520REPRESION%2520MAYO%25202017%2520%25281%2529.pdf>

power, there were 11 political prisoners in the country¹⁶). And, according to Nicholas Casey, New York Times' reporter, up until May 12th, Military Tribunals have incarcerated 120 civilians¹⁷. In addition, the NGO Public Space counted aggressions against 300 press workers up until May 31. According to the NGO, security forces have raided journalistic equipment and have used force against reporters, in an attempt to silence the press¹⁸.

¹⁶ Nicolás Maduro tiene ocho veces más presos políticos que Hugo Chávez. *Foro Penal Venezolano*
<https://foropenal.com/content/nicol%C3%A1s-maduro-tiene-ocho-veces-m%C3%A1s-presos-pol%C3%ADticos-que-hugo-ch%C3%A1vez>

¹⁷ Venezuela Tries Protesters in Military Court 'Like We Are in a War'. *The New York Times*
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/world/americas/venezuela-protests-maduro.html?ref=nyt-es&mcid=nyt-es&subid=article&r=0***

¹⁸ Dos meses de protestas, represión y violaciones de los DDHH. *Espacio Público*
<http://espaciopublico.org/dos-meses-protestas-represion-violaciones-los-ddhh/>