

MADURO: A decade continuing Chávez's socialist anti-imperialist struggle

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Maduro: A decade continuing Chávez's socialist and anti-imperialist struggle

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1. Introduction

When, by a narrow margin, Nicolas Maduro was elected president of Venezuela in April 2013, the mainstream media, echoing the opposition's routine false allegations, depicted his victory as fraud. Henrique Capriles, the right wing candidate, refused to accept the result and called on supporters to give vent to their rage by staging protests, which turned extremely violent, leading to the death of 11 people.

Conservative currents internationally, especially in the US, thought that after Hugo Chávez's premature death, Maduro's presidency represented the Bolivarian Revolution's last leg (The Economist, 14/12/2013, labelled it "Maduro's hollow victory:"). In short, for the US, its European accomplices and Venezuelan proxies, this was the Bolivarian Revolution's beginning of the end. Thinking the moment had arrived for a final push the opposition, at the behest of the U.S. State Department, embarked on an incessant wave of offensives aimed at the violent ousting of the Bolivarian government, the destruction of the Bolivarian constitution and the eradication of Chavismo from the face of Venezuela. One such episode in 2014, dominated by opposition street violence, lasted six months; another in 2017, also six months long, was even more violent, during which people were burned alive for being dark-coloured, i.e. Chavistas.

Notwithstanding their length and violent nature, these attempts failed. The latter in 2017 was unleashed in the context of a growing economic crisis brought about by domestic economic sabotage and US unilateral coercive measures (aka sanctions). In March 2015, Obama had formalised a regime of US sanctions against Bolivarian Venezuela by declaring it "an unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security. As against Allende in Chile, economic warfare deliberately brought about shortages of essential goods – especially food – three-digit levels of inflation, and general economic dislocation, all aimed at sowing maximum social discontent.

The consequence was a brutal attack on the standard of living of millions of Venezuelans, leading to a resounding victory at the December 2015 parliamentary elections for the opposition who came within an inch of winning two thirds of the National Assembly. The newly elected opposition president of parliament announced the removal of president Maduro "within six months." The end looked definitely nigh and with the coming batch of US-led aggression it looked like inexorably leading to it.

With the election of Donald Trump the US massively intensified its multi-faceted warfare on the people of Venezuela. It involved a crippling economic, trade and financial blockade combined with dangerous militaristic adventures, including a terrorist attack with explosives and a mercenary incursion both aimed at the physical elimination of the civil and military leadership of the Bolivarian Revolution. By 2020, the wide-ranging US blockade had led to a 99 percent fall of oil revenues and to well over hundred of thousands of unnecessary deaths. Since all these assaults failed, in despair, the US resorted to creating

a parallel Venezuelan government leading to Juan Guaidó's self-proclamation as 'interim president', a scheme that also failed.

Before the end of a very harsh and eventful decade (2013-23) for Venezuela had gone by, in March 2022, a confident president Maduro – presiding over an economy set to grow in double digits – welcomed at the Miraflores presidential palace a hat-in-hand Biden delegation rather desperate for Venezuela's oil, confirming the successful resistance by the Bolivarian government to imperial aggression.

In this document we chart (a) the cruel tests president Maduro and the people of Venezuela had to face during the intense US 'regime change' period of aggression from 2013 to 2023, and (b) how Venezuela under Maduro managed not only to survive the onslaught but kept Chavismo in power as the hegemonic political force it was under Hugo Chávez and playing a leading role in the struggle for socialism. No mean feat. The seeds planted by Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution had laid deep roots, turning Venezuela into a beacon of anti-imperialist resistance against twenty-two years of US-led aggression.

2. US aggression against Bolivarian Venezuela

US aggression against Bolivarian Venezuela goes back to 1998, the year Hugo Chávez was elected as president. Between 1999 and 2003 US hostility took the form of a 'blitzkrieg': an internationally supported mobilization of an enraged civil society to swiftly oust the presidency of Hugo Chávez, depicted as an 'abhorrent' anomaly that needed to be thoroughly extirpated. Media demonization of Chávez, who had been inaugurated in February 1999, began as early as August that year prompted by his initiative to furnish Venezuela with a new constitution through an elected Constituent Assembly.

Chávez won the referendum in April 1999 for the Constituent Assembly with 92% of the vote (and 86% for the method of electing the assembly), with his supporters winning 125 of the 131 assembly seats. The new constitutional text was approved with 72% of the votes in a second referendum in December 1999. But while the people of Venezuela got busy refounding their broken society, the New York Times (NYT) penned an editorial warning Venezuelans to be "...wary of the methods Mr. Chávez is using. He is drawing power into his own hands, and misusing a special constitutional assembly meeting now in Caracas that is composed almost entirely of his supporters [...] Mr. Chávez, a former paratroop commander who staged an unsuccessful military coup in 1992, has so far shown little respect for the compromises necessary in a democracy, which Venezuela has had for 40 years."

Thus, the NYT and the US political establishment knew that the new Constitution had not only expropriated the old pro-US Venezuelan elite from their control of the levers of power but had also furnished the emerging Bolivarian Venezuela with an anti-neoliberal constitutional instrument. Enacting such a constitution in 1999 in a Latin America that, with the exception of a heavily isolated post-USSR Cuba, was a sea of neoliberalism is a testament to the Comandante's political audacity. Furthermore, given the vital importance of oil revenues for Chávez's programme of social redemption, the Bolivarian Constitution identified the oil industry as a crucial state asset and stipulated that could not be privatised. Unavoidably, Venezuelan oil industry's strategic significance for the US's geopolitical dominance led to a confrontation between Washington and Caracas that would be exacerbated with the election of George W Bush in 2000.

By 2001 State Dept. officials held frequent meeting with opposition leaders, dissident military officers, business leaders and many others. At the time the NYT quoted a US Defence official saying, “We were sending informal, subtle signs that we don’t like this guy [Chávez]”. Large amounts of money began to pour into Venezuela’s opposition outfits mainly through the National Endowment for Democracy and various other shady channels. The strategic battle between Bolivarianism and Monroism had begun in earnest and its most immediate manifestation was the April 2002 coup d’état.

Venezuela’s elite, fully aware they had the complicity and support of the United States, unleashed a ‘Chilean coup strategy’ of mass protests aimed at creating the political conditions to overthrow the government and enticing the military to stage a coup. As in Allende’s Chile, the elite mobilised middle class women, landowners, university students, the Catholic Church, business associations, right wing political parties, journalists and the elite-owned media and dissident military officers. As a prelude, they managed to stage a ‘national stoppage’ in December 2001.

The April 2002 coup d’état was defeated by mass mobilization in just 47 hours. The ink in the world mainstream media’s printed celebrations had not yet dried when the people of Venezuela and majority sections of the army had rescued Chávez from detention and reinstated him to the presidency, making the coup-mongers ran like rats from a sinking ship (<https://cepr.net/the-venezuela-coup-20-years-later/>).

The coup defeat did not deter the US and Venezuela’s elite from their efforts to bring about chaos to oust Chávez. Counting on the support of the oil engineers and the traitorous CTV trade union federation, in 2003 the elite carried out a 68-day oil lockout of the state oil company (PDVSA) aimed at crushing the economy, leading to losses of over US\$14 billion.¹ However, with the defeat of the 2002 coup the elite lost its long-held control over the armed forces, while the defeat of the oil lockout allowed Chávez to take control over PDVSA, hitherto ‘a state within the state’ (<https://nacla.org/article/venezuela%27s-revolution-and-oil-company-inside>).

Nevertheless, the subversion continued. On 9th May 2004 eighty-eight Colombian paramilitaries – several wearing Venezuelan military uniforms – were arrested in Caracas “while training for an assault on a military installation”. The training centre was a farm estate owned by a Cuban exile, leader of the opposition coalition “Democratic Coordination”. A few hours later, 32 more were arrested outside Caracas. They planned to assault the Urban Security Command of the National Guard to capture weapons with the aim of arming 1,500 more paramilitaries to topple the government of Chávez, including his assassination. The Colombian and US governments, strongly suspected of being the masterminds, denied any involvement (<https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/coup-foiled-in-venezuela/>).

Later in 2004 Venezuela’s right wing activated the recall referendum, a constitutional provision (unique in the world) that allows for a referendum against the president (or any other elected authority) to face a national vote halfway their mandate that could force them out of office if the authority in question loses the vote. Openly supported by the US, the opposition turned the referendum campaign of ‘civil disobedience’ into another wave of violence, leading to the death of at least ten people. Chávez won a resounding victory,

¹ Bart Jones, *The Hugo Chávez Story*, The Bodley Head, 2008, p.386.

which the opposition again attributed to fraud, promising on 15th August 2004 they would produce the evidence. We are still waiting.

After decisively winning the 2006 presidential election (with 63 percent against 37 percent for the main opposition candidate), Chávez took the decision to deepen the Bolivarian process through a constitutional referendum, held in December 2007, which was defeated by very thin margin. The opposition, enjoying huge external support, unleashed a nasty but effective campaign of lies falsely claiming the reform intended to eliminate private property, install Chávez as dictator-for-life and even that parents would lose their legal parental rights over their children to the state. This was supplemented by yet another violent campaign of civil disobedience carried out primarily by opposition university students: buses were burned, motorways blocked, and there were street confrontations with the police that the mainstream media depicted as authoritarian repression.² It did the trick: many Chavista voters did not turn up to vote and the reform was rejected.

This was followed in 2008 by a coup attempt by disaffected military officers, including three generals who in September that year reportedly, planned to take over the presidential palace. Chávez denounced the plot as having the approval of the US government and took the decision to expel Patrick Duddy, US ambassador to Venezuela. Ever since, diplomatic relations between Caracas and Washington have been tense and tenuous.

Having failed so many times to dislodge Chávez from power, the election of ultra-right politician and staunchly pro-US Alvaro Uribe as Colombia’s president in 2008 led State Secretary Hillary Clinton to get the US adopt an overtly military approach. By the signing of the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in 2009 Colombia allowed the US to establish seven more military bases, ostensibly justified to strengthen ‘bilateral cooperation’ to fight against drug trafficking, terrorism and the like, but it was evident the real target was Bolivarian Venezuela. A special pamphlet by the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC)³ issued at the time concluded “...the DCA has been signed not in order to carry counternarcotic operations but in order to hugely increase air mobility reach on the South American continent, with Venezuela, objectively, as the primary target.” Soon, Venezuela was facing aggressive militaristic provocations by US warplanes violating Venezuela’s airspace at least 14 times. Such provocations went on throughout 2010, 2011 and 2012. But to no avail: Venezuela was not intimidated and in October 2012 Hugo Chávez was re-elected president with a convincing 55 percent of the vote.

His victory was, tragically, short-lived; in June 2011 Chávez he had been operated on for a cancerous tumour, followed by chemotherapy. Then, throughout 2012 and 2013 he repeatedly went back to Cuba to undergo surgery to remove cancerous tumours followed by radiotherapy treatment, until that fateful 5th March 2013 when he died from cancer at the premature age of 58.⁴ The US and its accomplices breathed a sigh of relief

² A report by PROVEA, an opposition, US-funded ‘NGO’ registered that between 1999 and 2007 there were 11,157 different forms of protests against the Bolivarian government, that is, about 1400 per year on average (*La Protesta Política en Venezuela* (2001-2007, p.80).

³ No to the US Militarization of Latin America, Venezuela Under Threat, *Venezuela Solidarity Campaign*, 2009.

⁴ From 2011 but also in 2012, Latin America’s left wing leaders, Lula, Dilma, Cristina Kirchner, and Paraguay’s Fernando Lugo contracted cancer; raising strong suspicions that Chávez’s cancer could have been deliberately caused.

and rubbed their hands with glee since they thought that with Chávez gone, the Bolivarian Revolution would also go with him. But they had another thing coming.

Overall, in this period (1999-2010) US strategy sought to generate either a chaotic civil war atmosphere or an actual civil war, hoping the induced instability would lead to the ousting of Chavismo or to conditions conducive to an external, US-led, military intervention. According to a report by PROVEA⁵, a ‘non-governmental organisation’ (NGO), between 1999 and 2010 there were 19,250 protests in Venezuela: 5,913 road blockings, 5,093 demos, 1,290 marches, 1,185 stoppages, 1,506 occupation of premises, plus 4,263 other forms of protests.

Such a volume and variety of protest required funding. There is a strong correlation between this *golpista* opposition hyperactivity and monies disbursed by the US through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Between 2002 and 2012, the NED injected more than US\$100 million to fund ‘NGOs’ and opposition groups.⁶ More support was to follow.

3. Post-Chávez US ‘regime change’ efforts

With the premature death of Hugo Chávez, the US intensified the multi-pronged hybrid war unleashed to destroy the revolution. It was ratcheted up on 9 March 2015 with Obama’s signing of Executive Order 13692 characterizing the Government of Venezuela as “*an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States*”, leading the US president “*declare a [US] national emergency to deal with that threat.*” The Order included provisions for the U.S. to appropriate all Venezuelan “property and interests” located in US territory.

Obama’s Executive Order 13692 both provided a legal fig leaf for and was the corollary of a relentless campaign of aggression against the Bolivarian government. The aggression would be massively intensified by Trump from 2017 right up to March 2022, when president Biden, desperate for oil supplies, sent an official US delegation to talk to president Maduro. As early as July 2017, six months after being inaugurated, Trump summarised US’s real intention toward Venezuela by stating that to oust the Maduro government “all options are on the table.” This overtly military threat would be incessantly repeated by Trump himself, and regularly parroted by fanatical cold warriors such as John Bolton throughout his administration.

The 2009 US-Colombia Defence Cooperation Agreement was a stepping-stone toward a military solution of the US’s ‘Venezuelan problem’. Consistent with this, the State Dept. took on the propaganda task to falsely depict Bolivarian Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorist organizations. Already by 2004, the US State Dept. Country Reports on Terrorism stated, “Venezuelan counterterrorism cooperation continued to be inconsistent at best”. The 2005 Report went further: “Venezuelan cooperation in the international campaign against terrorism remained negligible.”

⁵ *Venezuela: Una década de protestas 2000-2010*; that is an annual average of nearly two thousand.

⁶ Eva Golinger, *The Dirty Hand of the NED in Venezuela*, Counterpunch, 25 April 2014, (<https://www.counterpunch.org/2014/04/25/the-dirty-hand-of-the-national-endowment-for-democracy-in-venezuela/>)

Fast forward and in 2014 Venezuela was charged by the US State Dept., for the ninth consecutive year, as not cooperating fully with U.S. counterterrorism efforts and allowing for support of activities benefiting FARC, ELN, ETA and Hezbollah.⁷ In 2011, the U.S. had re-imposed sanctions against a state Venezuela arms factory, followed by the U.S. blocking arm sales to Venezuela in 2015, and in the same year, the then vice-president Joe Biden visited the Caribbean to pressurise countries to leave PetroCaribe, the regional oil procurement agreement, suggesting that Maduro had little time left. In the 2020 Country Report on Terrorism, the US State Dept. for the umpteenth time reiterated the false charge that “Venezuela remained a permissive environment of known terrorist groups, including dissidents of the FARC, the Colombian-origin ELN, and Hizballah sympathizers.”

Furthermore, from 2004 the U.S. also carried out an intense campaign falsely depicting the Bolivarian government as the main hub of narco-trafficking, propaganda spewed primarily by the US’s SOUTHCOM combatant command, thus adding a further military dimension to US aggression against Venezuela. In 2004, in a report to the US Senate, SOUTHCOM Commander General James Hill amalgamated drug trafficking, radical populism and guerrilla groups into the scope of US counterterrorism policies as major threats to the Western Hemisphere, pointing to Venezuela, Bolivia and Colombia as sources for these problems. In 2021, Admiral Craig Faller, SOUTHCOM Commander, told the Senate Armed Services Committee “*Venezuela has become a paradise of impunity for narcotraffickers...*”

This sustained campaign of demonization was parroted almost daily throughout 2004-2022 by the mainstream media with alacrity and unjournalistic colourfulness. A shameful example is a piece of ‘investigative journalism’ published in the Guardian/Observer (03/02/2008) with the title *Revealed: Chávez role in cocaine trail to Europe*. Depicting its government as a brutal dictatorship spiced up the demonization of Bolivarian Venezuela. The Economist, for example, wrote an editorial piece (24 January 2019) with the title “*How to hasten the demise of Venezuela’s dictatorship*”.

In this period, aggressions against Venezuela included the six-month long waves of opposition violence of 2014 and 2017. The two episodes of ‘civil disobedience’ and street violence were characterised by a campaign of intense hatred against Chavistas and Chavismo such that opposition thugs sought to set on fire as many institutions associated with Chavismo as they could, such as 35 health institutions. It was called *La Salida* (The Ousting), launched with the explicit purpose to overthrow democratically elected president Nicolas Maduro. Led by extreme right-wingers, Leopoldo Lopez, Maria Corina Machado and Antonio Ledezma, it lasted six months (January-June). There were reported instances of violent attacks (usually with fire or explosives) on ministry buildings, health clinics, public transport (setting fire to a public transport bus with passengers inside), other public buildings, social programme offices, buildings of left wing parties, electricity stations, a siege of the state TV station, an attempt to pour diesel into sources of drinking water, and an attempt to set on fire the ministry of housing office in Caracas with 1,200 employees inside, including 89 children in the ministry’s crèche.

This was supplemented with well-planned, well-funded and well-synchronised street barricades – known in Venezuela as *guarimba* – and the opposition wanton violence, which

⁷ U.S. State Dept., Country Reports on Terrorism 2014, Western Hemisphere.

the media (especially the Guardian⁸) glorified, led to the death of 43 people with 878 more gravely injured, falsely attributed by the media to government repression.⁹ Then in 2017 there was another guarimba, also explicitly aimed at violently overthrowing the democratically elected government, which also lasted six months (April-September) and was even more savage than the one in 2014. As in 2014, the violent offensive meant the erection of road blockades and barricades, the sabotage of public electricity installations, and vicious attacks on health centres, maternity hospitals, many public buildings, the state television channel, vehicles transporting food supplies, a military base, ambulances, pedestrians and passers-by, an indigenous radio station, police stations, children nurseries, and state-run factories. Dozens of public transport buses, fuel tanker trucks and police vehicles were burned with people inside, police officers were fired on, human excrement and bombs were thrown at police officers, opposition demonstrators used home-made bazookas and suspected Chavista supporters were gang-beaten stripped naked, tied to lampposts or trees and nearly lynched.

The novelty in the 2017 guarimba was the extensive use of fire against over 30 people with the deliberate intention to burn them alive – a ‘deed’ that was successfully achieved with Orlando Figuera. Most of those attacked were targeted for their Chavista ‘outlook’, i.e., being dark-skinned, and as such cannot be characterized as other than hate crimes.¹⁰ The mainstream media yet again glorified the 2017 opposition violence,¹¹ as a result of which 172 people were killed, 50 percent of whom, as reported by the then president of the National Assembly, Delcy Rodríguez, were not participating in the demonstrations, either in favour or against the government.¹²



Orlando Figuera (22), worked parking and looking after vehicles; on 4 June 2017, on his way back home, a group of masked protestors signalled him as a Chavista; he was beaten, stabbed, doused with fuel and burned alive (died a few days later in hospital). He was not a Chavista supporter.

With the failure of domestic mass mobilization as the means to bring about ‘regime change’, the US decided to take things directly in its own hands by embarking on a series of militaristic adventures, which we will briefly summarise. First, there was the violent

⁸ Guardian, ‘Demonstrations sweep across Venezuela – in pictures’, 20/02/2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2014/feb/20/demonstrations-sweep-across-venezuela-in-pictures>

⁹ At the time Mar Weisbrot wrote an op-ed in the Guardian’s Opinion section with the interesting title *Venezuela is not Ukraine* (4/03/2014) stating, “Venezuela’s struggle is widely misrepresented in western media. This is a classic conflict between right and left, rich and poor.” (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/04/venezuela-protests-not-ukraine-class-struggle>)

¹⁰ Lenin Brea, *Venezuela: Crimenes de odio y violencia incendiaria 2017*, El Perro y la Rana, 2017 (this volume contains distressing images, caution advised - <http://www.elperroylarana.gob.ve/venezuela-crimenes-de-odio-y-violencia-incendiaria-2017/>)

¹¹ See, for example, “On the frontline of Venezuela’s punishing protests”, *Guardian*, 25 May 2017, (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/25/venezuela-protests-riots-frontline-caracas-nicolas-maduro>). For a rigorous statistical and content analysis shows the strong anti-Chavista bias of seven highly influential newspapers (The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Miami Herald, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent and The Times). In Alan Macleod, *Bad News from Venezuela*, Routledge, 2018.

¹² Almeline Carrillo Viguez (47), a housekeeper, died on 19 April 2017 in Caracas whilst walking near a pro-Maduro demonstration by being hit by a bottle with frozen liquid thrown from a building by oppositionist Jesus Abi Zambito (42), a lawyer.

sabotage to the 2018 national election; the successful lobbying for US and EU sanctions; the assassination attempt on president Maduro and the revolution’s politico-military high command with drones loaded with explosives in August 2018; the induced exodus of huge number of Venezuelans in 2018; Guaidó’s self-proclamation as ‘interim president’ in 2019; the violent effort to force food through the Colombia-Venezuela border in Cucuta, an operation to militarily penetrate Venezuela with paramilitaries with the support of Colombia’s police and armed forces in February 2019; a cybernetic attack on the national electricity grid bringing about a total blackout in March 2019; a failed coup d’état in April 2019; and a Rambo-style attack on Venezuela aimed at ousting the government and assassinating President Maduro in May 2020¹³. In May 2020 the Trump government also indicted President Maduro (and other high officials) on charges of “narco-terrorism” offering a bounty of US\$15 million reward for information leading to his arrest and conviction.



A sense of the thinking going into US policy towards Venezuela can be gleaned from Trump’s State Secretary, Mike Pompeo, appointing Elliott Abrams as Special Envoy to steer US policy towards the Maduro government immediately after Guaidó proclaimed himself ‘interim president’ in January 2019. Abrams is a diplomat convicted over the Iran-Contra scandal, a specialist on dirty wars in Central America in the 1980s, who fought to cover-up the worst massacre in Latin America in El Mozote, in El Salvador, when about 1000 innocent civilians (including children and women) were murdered by forces trained and equipped by the U.S.¹⁴

In summary, the 2011-2021 decade was dominated by US-led and US-financed destabilization through the intense mobilization of ‘civil society’, that is, US’s Venezuelan proxies. The US-funded *Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social* registered a total of 92,719 public protests (an average of over 9,000 per year).¹⁵ The summary of the episodes of seditious violence referred to above, plus the amazingly high levels of opposition-generated social unrest, showed what the people of Venezuela endured during this period. But sponsored violence and unrest were not the only US vehicles for undermining Venezuela, as the next section shows.

4. US sanctions as a means of economic destruction

Since 2014 Venezuela has been subjected to 927 illegal unilateral coercive measures (aka sanctions) by the U.S. and its European accomplices: 477 measures against persons (mostly government officials), 169 directed against public bodies and private companies, 69 against national and foreign cargo ships as part of the US naval blockade, 58 against planes, and,

¹³ Francisco Dominguez, US imperialism’s decomposition accelerates: outsourcing ‘regime change’, *PRRUK*, May 2020, <https://prruk.org/us-imperialisms-decomposition-accelerates-outsourcing-regime-change/>

¹⁴ Francisco Dominguez, Meet Elliott Abrams, the war criminal enlisted to ‘steer US Venezuela policy’, *Morning Star* (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/meet-elliott-abrams-war-criminal-enlisted-steer-us-venezuela-policy>)

¹⁵ 10 años de protestas en Venezuela 2011-2021, 15 February 2022 (<https://www.observatoriodeconflictos.org.ve/informes-anuales/10-anos-de-protestas>)

crucially, 164 aimed at freezing assets and liquid funds held in various countries around the world (notably 31 tons of gold held in the Bank of England).¹⁶

As a result Venezuela has lost US\$232 billion in oil revenues. This in a context where through direct aggression – or the bullying of third parties threatened also with sanctions – the US has managed to totally exclude Venezuela from the international financial system. What this has actually meant, for example, is that when the Venezuelan government sought to pay any debt or purchase anything, the payment made not only was not processed but also, by the threat of US punitive action, it was not returned to Venezuela.

Thus, during 2019, Portugal’s Novo Banco S.A. for example, on three occasions prevented the Government of Venezuela from paying 4.7 million euros to the Italian Foundation for Bone Marrow Transplantation to provide treatment to 26 Venezuelan patients, including children and adolescents affected by severe health problems. In May 2019 alone five of these children died waiting to undergo the transplant. Currently, the Novo Banco has blocked or frozen US\$1.5 billion that belong to the people of Venezuela.¹⁷

US-sponsored and US-enforced illegal blockade was total: banks the world over, cowed by US pressure, froze virtually all Venezuelan accounts and retained its financial deposits. Oil exports and imports of oil-related spare parts and refining chemicals were completely blocked, making oil and gasoline output collapse. The export of gold and other minerals that Venezuela is rich in, were similarly targeted. Food and medicine – right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic – were also targeted with the explicit aim to drive people to despair and causing the unnecessary death of well over hundred thousands of the most vulnerable (chronically ill, children, cancer patients, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.). A 2019 study of the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) concluded that between 2017 and 2018 alone, US sanctions inflicted an estimated 40,000 deaths, that in 2018 there were 85 percent shortages of essential medicines, and that more than 300,000 people were at risk due to lack of access to medicines or treatment (80,000 with HIV, 16,000 who needed dialysis, 16,000 people with cancer and 4 million with diabetes and hypertension).¹⁸

1. Illegally retaining Venezuelan financial resources

	Country	US\$
Banco	Portugal	1,547
of England	UK	1,323
stream-London	UK	912.0
omo	US	507.3
rk	US	498.4
lear	Belgium	140.3
w/Eri	Belgium	53.01
ic	France	38.61

At this moment perhaps the best solution would be to accelerate the collapse [of Venezuela], even if it produces a greater period of suffering, whether for months or years.

William Brownfield, ex US ambassador to Venezuela; interview Voice of America, October 2018.

¹⁶ *Observatorio Venezolano Antibloqueo*, Los números del bloqueo CIIP.p15 (<https://observatorio.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/NUMEROS-BLOQUEO.pdf>)

¹⁷ See Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, Briefing: The effects of the economic blockade of Venezuela, February 2020, <https://www.venezuelasolidarity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Updated-briefing-18-02-2020-final-The-effects-of-the-economic-blockade-of-Venezuela-1774.pdf>

¹⁸ Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs, Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela, CEPR, April 2019, p.15; see also “The effects of the economic blockade of Venezuela”, *Venezuela Solidarity Campaign* Briefing, September 2019, <https://www.venezuelasolidarity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-effects-of-the-economic-blockade-of-Venezuela-8771.pdf>

The US and its accomplices were, however, thoroughly frustrated by the political courage of the Bolivarian government that, despite the sanctions’ devastating effects, never buckled under the pressure, and also by the heroic resilience of the people of Venezuela who, painfully aware of the consequences were the Maduro government to be ousted, remained supportive of their revolution.

Realizing the blockade by itself, no matter how devastating its effects, would not bring about the desired ‘regime change’, the US and its European accomplices combined economic warfare with stronger-arm tactics. First, in 2018 came the use of multilateral bodies such as the Organization of American States (OAS) whose infamous Secretary General, Luis Almagro feverishly sought OAS to adopt resolutions to intervene in Venezuela. When this failed, Almagro, instructed by the US, set up the Lima Group whose exclusive remit was to accelerate Maduro’s downfall. This also failed.

Next, in January 2019, Trump went for the illegal confiscation of a PDVSA company in the U.S., CITGO, and the freezing of all Venezuelan accounts in the US. In September 2019, Almagro got majority support to activate the possible application of the 1947 Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) to Venezuela. This raised the spectre of military intervention against Bolivarian Venezuela whose crisis, argued the OAS resolution (voted for only by 12 countries), had a destabilising effect and represented a threat to peace and security in the region. US extreme right wing Senator Marco Rubio (Rep.-Florida), welcome the OAS resolution on the grounds that Venezuela was the object of foreign intervention by China and Russia. A small number of right wing governments in Latin America verbally supported the TIAR threat but refused to commit to military action, as the US wanted.

In its efforts to strangle Venezuela’s economy the US hoped to bring people to such levels of despair that, spurred by the opposition, they would stage an uprising, bringing about chaos, riots, looting and violence to justify the desired ‘external’ (i.e., US-led military) intervention. But such chaos never materialized.

To help achieve this, the US went to great lengths. For example, the State Dept. plotted the kidnapping of Venezuelan Special Envoy diplomat Alex Saab precisely to stop the supply of food and medicines to Venezuela altogether. Saab was illegally arrested in Cape Verde in June 2020 whilst in transit travelling on a mission to obtain food and medical supplies for his country. He was illegally imprisoned in Cape Verde and eventually extradited to Florida in the US in October 2021, where he has been charged with conspiring to launder US\$350 million.

Saab’s diplomatic immunity has been grossly violated, an action that represents a flagrant violation of international law by the US. His arrest warrant was issued the day after his arrest; he was extradited, even though Cape Verde has no extradition treaty with the US, and despite rulings against Saab’s arrest and extradition issued by the West African Regional Court and the United Nations Human Rights Committee that he should be released.¹⁹ Saab’s plane, having ‘coincidentally’ been denied refuelling in Morocco and Senegal, was forced to land in Cape Verde. In his book, *Never Give An Inch* (2023), Mike Pompeo, admits the US plotted Saab’s kidnapping: “No other nation has global reach to interrupt

¹⁹ John Perry, Diplomatic Immunity, *London Review of Books*, 27 January 2023, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2023/january/diplomatic-immunity>

an Iranian-Venezuelan plot in real time and convince a small island nation to hold a wanted man.” It would seem the US’s ‘global reach’ got to Morocco, Senegal and Cape Verde, before Saab’s plane.²⁰

Yet, astonishingly, despite the colossal might of the US the Bolivarian government, led by Nicolas Maduro’s firm steering, has not only survived the onslaught but also managed to rescue the nation’s economy from US-induced collapse, both weakening the right wing opposition and substantially strengthening Chavismo in the process.

Only a government committed to building a socialist society, organising and mobilising the working class and its allies, linking up with other socialist governments and socialist mass parties, as well as an array of anti-imperialist forces in Latin America and internationally, has the necessary ingredients to resist the levels of imperialist aggression described above. This is a feat unimaginable in a government committed to neo-liberalism. The first thing neoliberal governments sacrifice to multinational capital and imperialism is their national sovereignty, amply demonstrated by neoliberal governments in Latin America and by the European Union’s abject submissiveness to Washington. It is therefore preposterous to label the Maduro government neoliberal, as some have done. No neoliberal government would systematically build a state designed to construct and defend the building of a socialist society and play a leadership role in the global struggle against imperialism and capitalism.

5. Venezuela’s leading role in world and Latin American affairs

Well before Chávez’s rise to the presidency he had a continental and international perspective. In December 1994 as Fidel Castro’s guest Chávez’s address to the Cuban authorities at the University of Havana presented his vision of a single, united, socialist Patria Grande, based on the ideas of Bolivar, Marti and Mariátegui. This was, in his view, the logical and necessary solution to the situation the continent faced on the eve of the 21st century.

Chávez’s election to the presidency in 1998, in the context of the severe contradictions and inequities generated by neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, contributed decisively to trigger the golden decade of Latin America’s regional integration. From Bolivarian Venezuela Hugo Chávez spearheaded the creation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Commonwealth of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), PetroCaribe, Operation Miracle and a number of other integrationist initiatives, and almost established a common currency and a regional central bank (Bank of the South).²¹

Venezuela’s Bolivarian leadership built very strong links with Cuba and the Cuban leadership, notably between Fidel and Chávez, then between Raul and Nicolas Maduro and now between the latter and president Diaz-Canel. Venezuela’s ruling party, the PSUV, the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) and Brazil’s Workers Party (PT) have played a central

²⁰ See details of the case in US National Lawyers Guild International Committee, Calls for immediate release of Venezuela diplomat Alex Saab, <https://orinocotribune.com/national-lawyers-guild-calls-for-the-immediate-release-of-venezuelan-diplomat-alex-saab-statement/>

²¹ Chávez’s banking plans cause apprehension, *FT*, 22 May 2007, <https://www.ft.com/content/d3f56d06-d8b2-11db-a759-000b5df10621>

role in helping shape the politics of Latin America’s Sao Paulo Forum, established in 1990. The Forum coordinates all the mass parties of the Latin American Left such as Cuba’s CCP, Brazil’s PT, Venezuela’s PSUV, Bolivia’s MAS, Nicaragua’s FSLN, Honduras’ LIBRE, Mexico’s MORENA, Kirchner Peronistas, and St Lucia’s Labour Party, all parties in government, as well as El Salvador’s FMLN, Paraguay’s Frente Guasú, and Uruguay’s Broad Front that are not in government²². All these parties have a mass following, whose combined membership is millions, and whose electoral strength runs in the tens of millions (the PT alone got 60 million votes in the 2022 election). The Forum also coordinates dozens of smaller left parties, many with elected deputies in national parliaments, mayors in key cities and councillors in hundreds of municipalities in the region.

There is also the Puebla Group set up primarily at the initiative of Mexico’s president Lopez Obrador that includes other presidents such as Bolivia’s Luis Arce and Argentina’s Alberto Fernandez, but also former presidents, including Spain’s Jose Zapatero, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, Brazil’s Dilma Rousseff, Dominican Republic’s Leonel Fernandez, Paraguay’s Fernando Lugo, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Colombia’s Ernesto Samper, Panama’s Martín Torrijos, Uruguay’s Pepe Mujica, Honduras’ Manuel Zelaya, plus a large number of former ministers, parliamentarians, political leaders and so forth. Though there is no Venezuelan representative in this coordination, the Grupo holds strong progressive views: it opposes US sanctions against Venezuela and supports Maduro’s dialogue initiatives in which Zapatero plays an important facilitating role. The Bolivarian government has robust links with the left wing presidents’ members of the Grupo. Thus, Venezuela’s interests are strongly present in the Grupo’s views and concerns whose objective consequence is opposition to imperialist aggression.

An example of the significance of Bolivarian Venezuela in Latin America was the XXII International Encounter of 78 Communist and Workers Parties from 60 countries, held in Havana between 27 and 29 October 2022. In point 7 of the approved Plan of Action, they included the imperialist aggression inflicted on Venezuela and its people:

“To promote solidarity with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the face of the aggression and illegal sanctions imposed by U.S. and European imperialism. To carry out actions demanding the immediate lifting of the illegal coercive measures and the return of the assets owned by Venezuela, which have been usurped by the imperialist power.”

The above demonstrates, that apart from genuine tactical and ideological differences, the overwhelming majority of the Left in Latin America, especially its mass parties, have a strong affinity with the government of President Nicolas Maduro, broadly share its objectives and draw inspiration from its exemplary struggle against, and resistance to, imperialist aggression. Standing on Chávez’s legacy, Maduro’s defiance of US aggression is seen as exemplary well beyond Latin America, especially among progressive forces in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

²² The left has been in office in these three countries (El Salvador, 2009-2014; Paraguay, 2008-2012; Uruguay, 2005-2020).

Furthermore, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela is a member of and holds a leading role in key international bodies where it plays a highly progressive role in favour of its own people, Latin America, and the peoples of the world who suffer imperialist aggression. And, as part of the G77+ China, Bolivarian Venezuela under Maduro's presidency continues to play a leading and active role opposing US and EU unilateral coercive measures.²³

Bolivarian Venezuela's initiatives have achieved substantial political victories against US aggression. For example, at the behest of Bolivarian Venezuela, at its 2016 summit held in Margarita (Venezuela) the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), condemned the unilateral coercive measures for negatively affecting people's human rights and preventing the full social and economic development of the peoples who suffer them. Furthermore, NAM foreign ministers issued the New York Political Declaration in September 2017 confirming the view adopted in Margarita the previous year.

Two years later, in March 2018, at Venezuela's initiative, whilst it held the presidency of the G77+ China, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), adopted a historic resolution condemning unilateral coercive measures. Togo and Jordan sponsored the resolution.

In 2019, whilst US-led mainstream media demonization raged against Bolivarian Venezuelan, its government got a seat in the UN Human Rights Council, thanks to the support of the G77+ China countries, despite strong US opposition, thus confirming Venezuela's progressive role in the UN. In 2019 too, and also at the initiative of Bolivarian Venezuela, the UN Human Rights Council at its 42nd ordinary session condemned the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures applied by the US government.

In February 2021, UN Human Rights expert and UN Special Rapporteur Alena Douhan delivered to a conference details of the negative consequences of the unilateral coercive measures on the people of Venezuela and urged the US and the EU to lift them²⁴. In September 2021 Bolivarian Venezuela took the initiative to propose the creation of the Group of Countries in Defense of the UN Charter to oppose all unilateral coercive measures for usurping the UN Security Council's authority and the use of such measures to force the sovereign will of other states. And in March 2022, the UNHRC adopted again a resolution submitted by the NAM condemning the negative consequences of the unilateral coercive measures by a wide majority. Unsurprisingly, all European countries and the US voted against.

Venezuela's political leadership in Latin America is also prominent. Under Chávez Venezuela was central to the establishment of UNASUR and CELAC, and many of the other regional integration institutions and bodies. They have remained central part of president Maduro's government regional strategy. Their functioning, however, was severely impaired during the US counteroffensive that led to the ousting and defeat of left wing governments in Honduras (2009), Paraguay (2012), Argentina (2015), Brazil (2016), Ecuador (2017), Bolivia (2019), El Salvador (2019), and Uruguay (2020), coupled with

²³ The Group of Seventy-Seven (G77) was established on June 15, 1964, which has since expanded to 134 member countries but the original name has been retained because of its historical significance.

²⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2021/02/preliminary-findings-visit-bolivarian-republic-venezuela-special-rapporteur>

intense efforts to violently overthrow the governments of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. Yet the continental right, despite withdrawing from some of the established institutions of regional integration, were unable to abolish them.

During this difficult period (2009-2020) Venezuela, under Maduro's presidency, led the opposition to OAS interference. Its cadre, diplomats and representatives at every level rigorously demolished all false charges concocted by OAS Secretary General, Luis Almagro against the government, which eventually led Venezuela to leave the OAS.²⁵ And Maduro successfully resisted and defeated the US-installed, now deceased, Lima Group.

With the political recovery of the Left in Latin America underway, Venezuela has joined other left governments efforts to fully re-establish UNASUR and CELAC. With the election of Lula to Brazil's presidency, the return of UNASUR is imminent. CELAC's 6th summit (Sept 2021) invited China's President Xi Jinping who, via videoconference, called for wider China-CELAC cooperation and stressed that relations with CELAC "are of utmost importance to China." At CELAC's 7th Summit (January 2023), with the second pink tide in full swing and at the invitation of host president, Alberto Fernandez, China's president Xi Jinping delivered another video message stating "We highly value our relations with CELAC, and take CELAC as our key partner in enhancing solidarity among developing countries and furthering South-South cooperation." Thus, Latin America has retaken the effort to build a multipolar world.

Furthermore, Venezuela was the location for the holding of the First International Conference of Afro-descendants on 10-12 November 2019, with representatives from 43 countries, around a hundred international delegates and more than 300 Afro-Venezuelan activists. The Conference discussed among other issues, racism and discrimination against Afro-descendant women. It reported the number of Afro-descendants in the American continent to be 130 million and Sub Saharan Africans living in Africa and Europe to be about one thousand million. It also discussed the struggle of Afro-descendants against neoliberalism in Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Haiti and Honduras. Previously, on 31st August 2019, Venezuela's National Assembly, in unanimous decision, declared that day as the International Day of Afro-descendants. Typically, Venezuela, under Chávez and under Maduro, follows statements of principle with political deeds. This year (2023) the Third Afro-Venezuelan National Congress was held on February 24, which, "within the spirit of the Bolivarian Revolution, will work towards dismantling 530 years of colonialism, slavery, racism and discrimination."²⁶

Chavismo under Maduro's political leadership went into top gear when Gustavo Petro was elected president of Colombia in June 2022. With the keen collaboration of president Petro, a raft of decisions was taken aimed at initiating economic, political and military collaboration with the Colombian government and normalising relations between the two countries, including fully reopening the common border and restoring their diplomatic relations. This has enormously facilitated Petro's efforts to bring about peace in Colombia, whose government requested Venezuela to act as a guarantor of the peace negotiations he

²⁵ Alexis Rodriguez, New OAS report on Venezuela: Is anything that Almagro says reliable at this point in the game?, *El Ciudadano*, <https://www.elciudadano.com/en/new-oas-report-on-venezuela-is-anything-that-almagro-says-reliable-at-this-point-in-the-game/12/04/>

²⁶ Orinoco Tribune, 25th February 2023, <https://orinocotribune.com/3rd-afro-venezuelan-national-congress-begins-in-caracas/>

has begun with the ELN guerrilla group's leadership, which travelled to Caracas where the negotiations began. Venezuela's relationship with Colombia has evolved to the signing in February 2023 of a bilateral trade agreement.²⁷

The Bolivarian government has appointed Felix Plasencia, former minister of foreign affairs, as Secretary General of ALBA-TCP, the intergovernmental mutual economic aid organisation, replacing Bolivian diplomat Sacha Llorenti. The ALBA-TCP 18th Summit of Heads of State and Governments, held in December 2022, was addressed by president Nicolas Maduro. The Summit Declaration reiterates its commitment to “the development and welfare of our nations, as well as to the defense of national sovereignty without any foreign interference” and “reject the colonialist and interfering principles of the Monroe Doctrine, used to justify destabilizing and interventionist practices in Latin America and the Caribbean”²⁸

Bolivarian Venezuela also plays a leading role in the area of socialist education with the production of a number of publications aimed primarily at Venezuela, but also have a broader regional and international reach. Among them, to mention the most important ones, are *Cuatro F* (struggle for socialism in Venezuela)²⁹, *Memorias de Venezuela*³⁰ (a radical take on Venezuelan history), and *Economía Política y Revolución*³¹ (on theoretical and political issues pertaining to the political economy of the Bolivarian Revolution).

Issue 107 of *Economía Política y Revolución*, for example, has nine articles dedicated to US-led NATO as the principal source of military aggression and wars in the world. Regular contributors and leading writers for this journal are Jesus Faria Tortosa and Ricardo Melendez (ministers for foreign trade and investment and planning, respectively), both architects of Venezuela's policies that led to the country's economic recovery. In issues 53, 54 and 56 there are discussions and explanations about the Anti-Blockade Law that has been used to falsely label Maduro's policies as neoliberal.

In the international arena there is *Correo del Alba*³² (politics, culture, art and current affairs in Latin America, the Caribbean and the world) that focuses on exposing neoliberalism, imperialism, and the manifold manifestation of the struggle for socialism and for a better world. Likewise with *América XXI*³³ that published 154 issues (2003-2018) before becoming a news website with a fortnightly bulletin. When Venezuela's right won an overwhelming majority in parliament, one of the worst moments for the Bolivarian government, issue 114-115 – Jan 2015 – carries an image of president Maduro, clenched fist, with the slogan ‘*Deepening Socialism in Action*’. More recently, Issue 154 – April 2018 – demonstrates how pre-Petro Colombia was a Washington proxy against revolutionary

²⁷ Presidents of Venezuela and Colombia Sign Trade Agreement, *Telesur*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Presidents-of-Venezuela-and-Colombia-Sign-Trade-Agreement-20230216-0015.html>

²⁸ ALBA-TCP, Declaration of the 22nd ALBA-TCP Summit on its 18th Anniversary, 14 December 2023, <http://www.minci.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ENG-DECLARACI%C3%83N-Cumbre-XXII-ALBA-TCP-VFF.pdf>

²⁹ [http://www.psvv.org.ve/publicaciones/cuatrof/;](http://www.psvv.org.ve/publicaciones/cuatrof/)

³⁰ http://www.papelesdesociedad.info/IMG/pdf/revista_memorias_de_venezuela.pdf

³¹ <https://ecopoliticarevolucion.blogspot.com>

³² <https://correodelalba.org/category/impreso/>

³³ <https://issuu.com/america21>

Venezuela; it also carries an in-depth article on Engels' *The origin of the family, private property and the state*.

6. How did president Maduro manage Venezuela's economic recovery?

The announcement by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) that Venezuela's economy would grow for the first time since 2014 by 5 percent in 2022 (one of the highest in the region), came as an unexpected shock to many, but when Credit Suisse predicted the growth to be 20 percent³⁴, the country's economic recovery became a certainty. By June 2022, even the BBC had published an analysis pinpointing the manifestations of this recuperation: the end of hyperinflation, an increase in oil output, an improvement in the supply of everyday consumption goods and the return of airlines and international artists.³⁵

The country's rate of hyperinflation had come down from a predicted 10 million percent (as reported by the IMF in 2018³⁶) to 7.1 percent in September 2021 and 1.4 percent in March 2022, and though the economy still faces inflationary pressures, hyperinflation has been stopped. Furthermore, it was reported that the output of essential goods of daily consumption had increased substantially: corn (essential for Venezuela's staple food, arepas) by 60 per cent, beef 50 per cent, sugar 30 per cent, milk 31 per cent, rice 24 per cent, chicken 23 per cent and so forth. In January 2023, in his state-of-the-nation speech to the National Assembly, President Maduro informed that Venezuela produces 94 percent of the subsidised food that goes into the food programme for the poor³⁷ and the more general shortages of all goods has been reduced by over 95 percent.

In April 2022 President Maduro even took the decision to cancel St Vincent and the Grenadines US\$70 million debt and reduced by half the debt of countries belonging to the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) to PetroCaribe.³⁸ He also restarted the agreement with the countries affiliated to PetroCaribe with a 35 per cent discount in the price of oil. By March 2022, it was reported that Venezuela's non-oil exports had increased by 76 percent.

In Venezuela economic policy is developed and implemented within the framework of state monopoly over the country's crucial foreign revenue sources (oil, gold, rare minerals, foreign trade and so forth), which when added to the Maduro government's deftness, decisively contributed to produce these impressive results, persistent US economic aggression notwithstanding.

Given Venezuela's economy lost 99 per cent of its oil revenues because of US sanctions, it makes economic sense to draw and harness existing private sources of capital to generate productive activity, employment and value added that contribute to improving

³⁴ *Bloomberg*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-06/venezuela-s-economy-may-expand-20-in-2022-credit-suisse-says>

³⁵ BBC Mundo (in Spanish), 13 June 2022

³⁶ Reuters, 9 October 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/venezuela-economy-idINKCN1M1J1YX>

³⁷ They are the CLAP boxes that benefit and ensure subsidized food protection to about 7 million families; furthermore, Venezuela as a nation used to import 80-85 percent of the food it consumed.

³⁸ This is driven by Venezuela's revolutionary solidarity, inspired by Hugo Chávez's political and ethical vision whose tradition President Maduro, leading the PSUV and the Bolivarian revolution, has maintained.

people's living standards. The Bolivarian government has actively sought this investment. Thus, in a tour to Eurasia at the beginning of 2022 president Maduro increased Venezuela's trading partners in the world, adding to the already strong economic links with China and Russia, Turkiye, Algeria, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar and Azerbaijan. Venezuela's vast assets and the anti-blockade legislation make its economy attractive to foreign investment that would not happen without the Venezuelan state creating incentives for profit from investment that will operate under the aegis of the Bolivarian state.

The mainstream media cynically have welcomed the policies of the governments of Venezuela and Cuba to attract foreign investment as an inexorable prelude to capitalist restoration, even though they are fully conscious these are dictated by the exogenously generated crisis in these nations and are not steps towards embracing capitalism. The corporate media have been quick to attribute Venezuela's economic recovery to the supposedly capitalistic nature of Maduro's strategy. Spain's intensely anti-Chavista *El País* (May 26 2022), for example, characterised Venezuela's recovery as "rampant capitalism."

US imperialism, however, shelter no illusions about capitalist restoration: Biden's exclusion of Venezuela, Cuba and also Nicaragua from the 9th Summit of the Americas held in Los Angeles (6-10 June 2022), though it badly backfired on him, confirmed that US imperialism does not think Cuba's and Venezuela's efforts to attract foreign investment represent a return to capitalism. Biden's contacts with Maduro's government and the election of Petro in Colombia prompted *The Economist* (18/08/22) to comment: "...the quest for cheap oil is not the only reason [...the US] will also not want to strain relations with the growing ranks of left-wing governments in the region..."

In Cuba foreign investment was upgraded from being ruled by an Investment Law (2014) to being recognized in the new constitution in a context of initiatives aimed at attracting foreign investment such as the Mariel Special Development Zone, which allows for 100 per cent foreign ownership. The law already guarantees foreign companies benefits, protection against expropriation without due process, plus tax and other assurances. Foreign investment has been encouraged by Cuba since the collapse of the USSR by Fidel in 1991, then Raul after 2008 and now Diaz-Canel.

Though not identical, the Anti-Blockade Law (ABL) approved by Venezuela's National Assembly in May 2021 provides similar incentives with the same objective: to attract foreign investment. The ABL also has constitutional status and necessarily contains clauses of confidentiality to circumvent US sanctions to protect state assets and the identity of domestic and foreign investing companies, while furnishing similar guarantees as in Cuba. Additionally, an Observatory to supplement the ABL has been established to monitor its application and implementation, which specifically upholds Art.303 of the Constitution that stipulates total state control over PDVSA, the state oil company. As in Cuba, Venezuela has also adopted a very similar law for the creation of special economic zones (ZEE in its Spanish acronym).

Furthermore, PDVSA, all basic enterprises, the Caracas Metro, electricity, telecommunications and water, just to mention a few examples, are firmly in state hands. William Serafino aptly formulated how fallacious is the charge of neoliberalism against president Maduro's economic policies: "It is an absurd contradiction to qualify a government as neoliberal if it has a wide range of taxes to strengthen its revenue collection, sustain subsidies to public

services, and a massive food program: the CLAP, whose acquisition cost for the population is far below market prices. It is simply nonsense to call this neoliberalism. In fact, it is the opposite of neoliberalism."³⁹

No class lines have been crossed either by Cuba or Venezuela. By February 2021 the Venezuelan government had received over 200 private investment proposals from all over the world. Venezuela's opposition leader, Jorge Luis Borges, aware of their highly positive economic potential, sought to discredit both the ABL and ZEE by falsely suggesting the government 'aims at strengthening corruption and organized crime'. Had this been the case, it surely would have had both the opposition's and the US's enthusiastic support. In case there was any doubt, in March 2021, extreme right wing US Senators Marco Rubio, Rick Scott, Jacky Rosen and Thom Tillis introduced the "Banning Operations and Leases with the Illegitimate Venezuelan Authoritarian Regime Act" (or "BOLIVAR Act") that aims to prohibit any US federal agency from awarding US government contracts to companies that are engaged in business with the Maduro government. As we can see, all wings of US imperialism and their 'operatives' in Venezuela concur with the Latin American and international left that Maduro's is a socialist government and has nothing neoliberal about it.

The government of president Maduro has maintained Hugo Chávez's and the Bolivarian Revolution's commitment to social justice as a central ethical tenet that guides its politics and actions. Confirming this, domestic consumption has been expanded through an array of government bonuses (Christmas, gasoline, family economy, lactating and pregnant women, single mothers, the elderly, youth

The State, jointly with private initiative, shall promote the harmonious development of the national economy, to the end of generating sources of employment, a high rate of domestic added value, raising the standard of living of the population and strengthen the economic sovereignty of the country.
Art. 299, Bolivarian Constitution

apprenticeships and others), all paid electronically. Additionally, 76 per cent of the national budget was devoted to social expenditure in 2021, with 77 per cent for 2022.

Demonstrating this commitment, president Maduro put forward a budget for fiscal year 2023, smaller than the 2022 one due to a temporary appreciation of the dollar but nevertheless in line with the overall approach of the Bolivarian government, that devoted 77 per cent to social expenditure, with health care and education assigned 23 and 20 per cent respectively. The National Assembly approved it with only one vote against. In December 2022 president Maduro announced the completion of 4.4 million houses for the poor, a feat not achieved by any neoliberal government anywhere in Latin America or the world.

President Maduro's commitment to the ethical principles of the revolution were again confirmed in March 2023 when, to celebrate International Women's Day, he announced the creation of the Great Mission Women Venezuela to place them at the centre of the nation's political life by empowering them in positions of leadership in every sphere of social life.

³⁹ William Serafino, *Maduro's Neoliberal Turn?*, *Orinoco Tribune*, 19 February 2023, <https://orinocotribune.com/maduros-neoliberal-turn/>

At the core of Venezuela's economic revival lies the digitalisation of its economy and the huge number of small and medium-sized productive enterprises. In 2020 there were 121,432,000 digital transactions that increased to 201 million in 2021, covering 80 percent of all domestic transactions (they have further increased since). The Servicio Autónomo de Registros y Notarías (SAREN in its Spanish acronym), body responsible for registering and processing authorisation to set up small businesses, reports that 7,657 small enterprises were registered in 2020, 19,284 in 2021, and, by the end of May 2022, 13,096. These small-sized enterprises are private, cooperative and communally owned.

Benefitting from the vigorous development and expansion during the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic by the Bolivarian government⁴⁰, the Homeland Card (a personalised QR identity available to all citizens), a generous policy of state credit for new small entrepreneurs and the digitalization of transactions have all greatly facilitated both the establishment and consolidation of the small enterprises.

An article I wrote in August 2022 summarises the central components of president Maduro's strategy that explain Venezuela's extraordinary economic recovery.

[...] Bolivarian Venezuela has guaranteed food security to all — but particularly its most vulnerable citizens; has protected the population from the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic and kept key public services functioning; has deftly circumvented the global minefield of US sanctions including challenging US prohibition to trade with Iran, Russia, China and others; has increased oil and other exports; has attracted foreign capital while ensuring state pre-eminence over such investment to protect national sovereignty; has sustained and expanded domestic consumption while simultaneously bringing hyperinflation under control and has delivered 4.1m new houses. Venezuela has achieved all of this while at the same time it has vastly expanded, strengthened and empowered the mass organisations of the working class, peasants, and grassroots communal bodies not only as a means of mass political mobilisation but as a deterrent to militaristic, terrorist adventures unleashed from Colombia by Washington's "regime change" machinery. This is Bolivarian socialism at work.⁴¹"

7. The nature of the Bolivarian Revolution

The Bolivarian revolution is a novelty in that it has sought to bring about a socialist transformation of society, politics and economy without a revolutionary assault on the state. This has meant that the political rights of right wing opposition parties, the capitalist associations, the right wing media, and so forth have been respected and upheld even when they have engaged in insurrectionary tactics and treason, something they have consistently and systematically perpetrated since 1998. Another specificity unique to Venezuela, unlike the progressive and revolutionary governments of the first and second pink tide (Cuba

excepted), is the strong civic-military alliance that lies at the foundation of the evolving Bolivarian state.

This uniqueness has also determined that the transition to bring about the socialist transformation of society, economy and state has been taking place much more slowly than in a conventional revolution (if such a thing exists). In Venezuela this feature has been compounded by its overarching century-long overspecialization as an oil exporting economy that has left an intractable legacy of economic, political and social distortions. *Chavistas* (and others) refer to this hefty obstructive 'inheritance' with its sequels of swathes of chronic poverty, a culture of corruption and inefficiency, client politics, opportunism and treason, as *rentismo* (rentier capitalism). Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso, Venezuela's oil minister in the 1960s and a member founder of OPEC, realized early the tribulations caused by Venezuela's immense economic dependency on oil that brought waste, corruption, consumption, inefficiency and debt. Thus, in his view, oil was not black gold: he called it 'the devil's excrement.'

The enormous changes Venezuela's economy has undergone since 1999 under *Chavismo* notwithstanding, there is a generalized consensus among friends and foe that its capitalist nature, though greatly weakened, has not yet been fully overcome. All of this has been further compounded by the misuse and abuse the right wing opposition makes of its political rights. Bolivarian respect for democracy manifests itself in well over 30 electoral processes that, in the context of sustained and brutal US aggression, give the right wing opposition regular opportunities (almost every year) to destabilize and endeavour to overthrow the Bolivarian government. For this unconstitutional and seditious aim Venezuela's right enjoys unconditional and solid political, financial and media support and assistance from US imperialism and its European accomplices. The slow pace of the socialist transition, besides, allows the right wing to use its still abundant means to confound, contaminate and corrupt individuals and coopt sections of the social movements.

ELECTIONS AND REFERENDA IN Venezuela – 1999- 2021							
No	Year	Election	Winner	No	Year	Election	Winner
1	1998	Presidential	Chavismo	20	2010	Regional	Chavismo
2	1999	Referendum	Chavismo	21	2010	Municipal	Chavismo
3	1999	Referendum	Chavismo	22	2012	Presidential	Chavismo
4	1999	Const.-Ref.	Chavismo	23	2012	Regional	Chavismo
5	2000	Presidential	Chavismo	24	2013	Presidential	Chavismo
6	2000	Regional	Chavismo	25	2013	Municipal	Chavismo
7	2000	Parliament	Chavismo	26	2014	Municipal	Chavismo
8	2000	Municipal	Chavismo	27	2015	Parliament	Opposition
9	2000	Referendum	Chavismo	28	2017	Consultation	Chavismo
10	2004	Municipal	Chavismo	29	2017	Municipal	Chavismo
11	2004	Recall Ref	Chavismo	30	2017	Regional	Chavismo
12	2004	Regional	Chavismo	31	2017	Const.-Ref	Chavismo
13	2005	Parliament	Chavismo	32	2018	Presidential	Chavismo
14	2006	Presidential	Chavismo	33	2018	Municipal	Chavismo
15	2007	Referendum	Opposition	34	2020	Parliament	Chavismo
16	2008	Regional	Chavismo	35	2020	Parliament	Chavismo
17	2008	Municipal	Chavismo	36	2020	Consultation	Chavismo
18	2009	Referendum	Chavismo	37	2021	Regional	Chavismo
19	2010	Parliament	Chavismo	38	2021	Municipal	Chavismo

⁴⁰ Venezuela's successful battle against the Covid-19 pandemic scored one of the best performances in the region and the world — 5,716 deaths, that is, 20.1 per 100,000 inhabitants compared with 304.18 per 100,000 in the US.

⁴¹ Francisco Dominguez, Understanding Maduro's successful socialist economic strategy, *Morning Star*, 9 August 2022, <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/understanding-maduros-successful-socialist-economic-strategy>

Yet, no matter how much has US imperialism tried through its Venezuelan proxies to oust the Bolivarian government for nearly 25 years it has hit an unbreakable revolutionary wall of mass organization and mass mobilization in defence of the Bolivarian government, the revolution and participatory democracy, defeating every attempt. These defeats can be explained for three reasons, first, the political skill of Chávez and Maduro in leading the Bolivarian movement; secondly, the vast network of social organizations that identify themselves as *Chavistas* and who willingly follow the political lead given by president Maduro; and thirdly, the authority of the PSUV, the hegemonic political party of the Bolivarian process.

The social movements at the base of Bolivarianism are painfully aware not only of the devastating consequences they will suffer if the Maduro government were overthrown. They also know that when the economy nearly collapsed as a result of US sanctions, it was the policies implemented by the Bolivarian government, especially on health and food, that crucially helped alleviate their plight. In that context of dire need the continuation of social progress, especially the vigorous housing, subsidized food and free health care programmes, persuaded them that their revolution was suffering a temporarily setback, not a defeat.

This attitude of the *Chavista* mass of the people, the government's progressive policies and its continuous quest to support progressive developments in the region and internationally informs the stance taken by the Latin American and international Left towards Venezuela under president Maduro. This is not only correct from a practical but also from a principled viewpoint. The most important historical gain made by the people of Venezuela is the Bolivarian government, an assertion that should be extended to the governments of Lula in 2002, Evo in 2005, and Correa in 2006, but also to the political instruments that made them possible, namely Brazil's Workers Party, Bolivia's MAS, Venezuela's PSUV and the Citizen Revolution Movement party under Correa, to mention a few examples.

The mass movements in these countries, having a clear understanding of the significance of their progressive governments, fought hard to recover them in Brazil and Bolivia, as they are fighting to recover the citizens' revolution government in Ecuador⁴². Therefore, the Left in Latin America and internationally have adopted the correct principled position, namely, to provide solid support for historic gains of such magnitude, regardless of differences that do exist among and within these political parties. Apart from many progressive features, these parties share a strong resolve to work together not only on immediate practical matters but also to jointly develop a strategy to construct an economically and politically integrated Patria Grande.

In 1998 Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution brought about a revolutionary transformation turning Venezuela not only into a beacon of hope for the struggle against neoliberal immiseration and imperialist pillage the world over, but especially in Latin America where it became a source of inspiration. Venezuela's successful resistance against a decade of intensified US aggression under president Maduro's leadership is in itself a

⁴² On 5th February 2023, the Citizen Revolution Movement, led by Rafael Correa, inflicted a heavy defeat to right wing neoliberal Ecuador's president, Guillermo Lasso both at the local elections and his thoroughly manipulated referenda (<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2023/02/07/progressive-comeback-in-ecuadors-local-elections/>)

strong source of inspiration for the struggle against neoliberalism in the region. Furthermore, his determination to continue and ability to deepen what Hugo Chávez began substantially contributes to galvanize the existential battle of Bolivarianism against Monroism that lies at the heart of Latin America's struggle for its second independence. This existential battle-line was confirmed by none other than John Bolton, Trump's National Security Advisor, who, in April 2019, addressing a group of Bay of Pigs veterans in Miami, told them "Today, we proudly proclaim for all to hear: the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well."

8. Conclusion

Nicolas Maduro victory at the April 2013 presidential election by a narrow margin against right wing candidate Henrique Capriles, was labelled by *The Economist* (20/04/2013) as 'Maduro's lousy start'. *The NYT*'s summed up Maduro's chances to succeed (14/04/2013) as follows: "Yet even his supporters say that Mr. Maduro lacks his predecessor's sharp political instincts and magnetism, and many questions remain about how effectively he will lead at home and abroad." By 2013 the mainstream media, well before the torrent of sanctions that would be inflicted on Venezuela by Obama and especially Trump, did not give its economy under Maduro too many chances. In November 2013, for example, *The Guardian* (20/11/2013) was quoting opposition figures that argued that unless he moved to the right the economy would collapse like a "house of cards."

By the beginning of 2016, the *Washington Post* (29/01/2016) declared Venezuela to be "on the brink of a complete economic collapse." No wonder in 2017 *The Economist* asked (11/05/2017), "Why is Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro still in power?" In 2018 after Trump had applied hundreds of sanctions, the *Washington Post* (21/08/2018) reported Venezuela to be "swept by economic chaos" with inflation "hurtling toward 1 million percent and hunger spreading nationwide." By 2019, *The Economist* (24/01/2019) was advising "How to hasten the demise of Venezuela's dictatorship", approvingly stating, "Recognising an interim president instead of Nicolas Maduro is a start". *The Economist*'s advice merits to be quoted in full: "*America and the European Union should use all the tools at their disposal to promote peaceful change by boosting Mr Guaidó's parallel government. That could include putting some of the money paid for oil exports into an account reserved for the national assembly, and using the threat of further sanctions to encourage defections from the regime.*"⁴³ Though the mainstream media acknowledged that Venezuela was subjected to sanctions, they deviously blamed the country's severe economic problems on the Bolivarian Revolution and, particularly, Hugo Chávez,⁴⁴ concluding Nicolas Maduro's government was to come to an end as night follows day.

By the end of 2020, the corporate media began to change its tune, with no more predictions of the imminence of Maduro's downfall. The focus turned to the predicament of "Venezuela's opposition splits over taking part in coming elections" (*NYT*,

⁴³ In all their punditry, these media studiously avoided either mentioning the devastating effects of US sanctions or they pretended there was no connection between them and the grave economic situation Venezuela was under.

⁴⁴ On 2nd February 2019, *The Economist* attributed the original cause of the crisis to be in "the socialist dystopia created by the late Hugo Chávez".

19/09/2020). Previously, not recognising election results, let alone accepting the country's electoral system had been a matter of 'ethical principle' for the US, the EU, Venezuela's opposition and the corporate media. Later that year there was an almost positive NYT piece (19/11/2020) about the president's decision, titled "Venezuela's President Maduro Pardons 100 Political Opponents." In January 2021, with Venezuela's economy in serious recovery, the media looked for scapegoats, thus this Washington Post piece (19/01/2021), "Trump's bluster failed Venezuela. Biden must use diplomatic and economic levers to address the crisis." By May the year after (17/05/2022) the Post reported, "Biden administration begins easing restrictions on Venezuela oil." By August, *The Economist* (19/08/2022), in characteristically biased language, began admitting 'regime change' failure: "Venezuela's dictator is less isolated than he once was."

US foreign relations think tank par excellence, the Council of Foreign Relations (04/11/2022), went even further by asking "Do US sanctions on Venezuela work?" concluding they don't since they "have contributed to the suffering of Venezuelan people and failed to unseat Maduro."⁴⁵ Reuters registered the failure and the economy's recovery (12/01/2023) with "Venezuelan economy grew above 15% in 2022" as reported to the National Assembly by President Maduro, and with another article later that year (23/08/2022), "Venezuela's economy grew 17% in Q1, says central bank president."

By October 2022, the NYT in Opinion Editorial article (08/10/2022) finally came out with what everyone already knew: "The U.S. Cannot Uphold the Fiction that Juan Guaidó Is the President of Venezuela", forcefully arguing "It is time for the Biden administration to accept that the Guaidó gambit has failed and that most Venezuelans, and most of the international community, have moved on. The White House needs a Venezuela policy based on fact, not fiction. And the fact is that Mr. Maduro is president of Venezuela and Mr. Guaidó is not." At the end 2022, the NYT (30/12/2022) informed, "Guaidó is voted out as leader of Venezuelan opposition" and as 'interim president'. As with the order to proclaim himself 'interim president', the order to remove Guaidó most certainly came from Washington too. Guaidó was removed with the same ease as any US puppet is discarded. To crown it all, confirming Maduro's political success in the colossal battle with the empire, on 9th February 2023 the Washington Post published "How Maduro Beat Guaidó and the US in Venezuela's Long Standoff."

Maduro's leadership qualities notwithstanding, none of this would have been possible without Venezuelan people's resilience. But, to be more precise, 'the people of Venezuela' in 2022 have enormously advanced and politically matured from what they were at the time of their spontaneous April 2002 mobilization to restore Chávez to power, and thereby defeat the coup. They are now organized in tens of thousands of well-structured grassroots committees and organizations covering every aspect of societal importance (health, water, education, land, food distribution, women, youth, communal councils, cooperatives, and much more). This universe of grassroots bodies gives tangible expression to Venezuela's constitutional principle that lies at the heart of its political system, namely, participatory democracy. The latter includes the armed forces, a key

⁴⁵ Council of Foreign Relations went even further by asking "Do US sanctions on Venezuela work?" <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/do-us-sanctions-venezuela-work>

component of the socialist Bolivarian state, in the unbreakable civil-military alliance, a dimension that is completed with the people's militia.

The instrument that articulates and harmonizes this complex social coalition of workers, peasants, women, youth, the military, and so forth that has guided it for over two-decades of Bolivarian Revolution is twofold: Hugo Chávez's political leadership evolving into the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The PSUV enjoys Gramscian political and cultural hegemony in Venezuela by virtue of its intellectual and moral leadership over the majority of the (especially working) population. The PSUV hegemony was brought about primarily by the Bolivarian reinterpretation of the history of the class struggle in Venezuela since national independence. Lucidly formulated by Hugo Chávez as the ideological foundation from which to transform society, its first concrete manifestation, after the 1992 rebellion with the 'por ahora' that shook the nation, was the 1999 Bolivarian constitution.⁴⁶ The PSUV is able to exert hegemony as the guiding force of the Bolivarian Revolution by virtue both of its structural bonds with and as an integral part of the historic bloc that drives the revolution forward.

The above sketchy selection of media headlines charts the relentless ordeal Bolivarian Venezuela is being subjected to by the US brutal hybrid war. It shows that during the evolution of the decade-long struggle president Nicolas Maduro had his hands full with defending his nation and his people, never giving an inch but skilfully navigating the highly dangerous waters of imperialist hostility and aggression. The result is rather impressive and it would be no exaggeration to assert that Maduro at the helm of the state, leading the Chavista mass movement, is ready for another decade of Bolivarian socialist and anti-imperialist struggle.

⁴⁶ John Bellamy Foster, Foreword to the Summer Issue, *Monthly Review*, 1 July 2010 (<https://monthlyreview.org/2010/07/01/foreword-to-the-summer-issue/>); it provides an illuminating analysis of the historical and intellectual process that shaped Chávez's radical reinterpretation of Venezuelan history to produce Bolivarianism.



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