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Twelve FAQ about what is happening in Venezuela

El Libertario editorial collective

February 2014

1) Are the protests in Venezuela led by opposition parties on the right?

No. The current wave of protests began in the city of San Cristóbal (Tachira) on Feb. 4 when students denouncing security issues on the university campus were met with repression and several were jailed. The consequent protests focused on liberating the detained students, spread to other cities and were also met with repression, intensifying student unrest. It was in this context that a faction of the opposition launched a proposal for street demonstrations dubbed “La Salida” to demand President Maduro’s resignation, while another faction opposed the idea of street demonstrations focused on this larger, single demand. Despite the arrest of the conservative politician Leopoldo López, the widespread protests all over the country have overwhelmed and “surpassed on the left” the opposition political parties.

2) Are the protests in Venezuela part of a coup against Maduro’s government?

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In Venezuela, a country with a history of military coups, there is always some possibility that events will take that turn. However, the current situation is very different from 2002 when Hugo Chavez was temporarily taken out of power by a coup. After that date, the armed forces were politically cleansed at high and middle ranks; those who filled the open positions were ideologically committed to the government and further secured by receiving a free charter to control various country businesses. The most likely source of a coup today in Venezuela is one Chavista faction or another. Their aim would be to ensure the country's governability so that the military along with energy transnationals may continue to operate successfully in the country.

3) Are the protests connected to a “conspiracy” on the part of private media networks in Venezuela?

Today, broadcasting stations have been silenced by the government of Nicolás Maduro. The last nationwide network, Globovisión, was bought by an entrepreneur with ties to the government, who modified its informational approach. Radio stations and newspapers are being pressured to not report on the protests based on the argument that doing so incites “violence.”

In addition, print media suffers from a lack of paper due to the controls on foreign currency exchange imposed by the government. For this reason, protestors have taken responsibility for generating their own reports, making extensive use of social media networks.

4) Are the protests' only aim to oust President Nicolás Maduro from power?

This is a movement without a center, and there are many demands. To sum them up, there are two agendas: one from Caracas and one from the cities in the interior of the country. From Caracas, the majority demands are the President's resignation, the liberation of political prisoners, and the rejection of violence. From the other cities, which have suffered extremely for years from the interruption of public services and the scarcity of basic goods, the problems

of soaring inflation, scarcity, and lack of water and electricity are also a central majority focus.

5) Are the protests limited only to the middle class?

In Caracas, the majority of protestors are middle class people and students from public and private universities. In the interior of the country, the situation is completely different and many in the popular sectors take an active part in the protests.

6) Are the images that have been circulating of repressive acts in Venezuela all false?

There are some who have maliciously or innocently spread images and videos that do not correspond to current events in Venezuela, but social media networks have proven to be very good at self-regulation and have successfully denounced these as false and educated users on how to verify information before sharing it. The government's strategy has been to "attempt to show" that since 3, 4, or even 10 images are false, all the others are also. But the facts are there, recorded through the technological devices of dozens of witnesses of the government's repression.

7) If it isn't the political parties, then who's organizing the protests in Venezuela?

In the end, the political parties have had to join in on the protests and have tried—up to now unsuccessfully—to channel them. For example, the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) called for three days free of demonstrations after February 12 for mourning, and people disobeyed, continuing on the streets. Many launch initiatives through social media networks; some are picked up and go viral; others fall on deaf ears and are forgotten.

8) If Nicolás Maduro resigns, will Venezuela return to its past state of affairs before Chávez?

No. First, in the case that should happen, it is impossible to turn back the achievements regarding progressive rights established by the Constitution and internationally backed. Second, it is impossible that, as some believe, the "opposition"—whatever we understand that to mean—will oust "chavismo" from "power"—in the

broadest meaning of that term. The Bolivarian movement has a broad base that, regardless of how the protests end up, will continue figuring centrally in Venezuelan politics in the near and not so near future.

9) What is happening with political repression in Venezuela now?

As of this date, there have been 11 deaths related to the demonstrations, the majority a direct result of repressive units. An estimated 400 people have been detained for participating in the protests.

Just in Caracas, according to counts from the human rights center of the Catholic University DDHH, 197 have been released, 7 remain detained, 6 are disappeared or unaccounted for, 8 have been deprived of liberty by court sentence.

10) Who is repressing the protests in Venezuela?

Mainly the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB), the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN), and paramilitary groups indirectly funded and openly encouraged by the government.

11) What role does US imperialism play in Venezuela?

President Barack Obama and the State Department publicly condemned the restriction of democratic liberties in Venezuela. This led Nicolás Maduro and his followers to accuse them of meddling in the internal affairs of another country and violating Venezuela's sovereignty. Despite insisting that the US is behind the protests, Maduro has also invited the North American government to reestablish diplomatic relations between the two countries. On the other hand, Chevron continues to have many productive business deals in Venezuelan territory in the areas of gas and oil exploitation through contracts signed by President Chávez that are good for another 30 or 40 years. The US continues to be Venezuela's greatest "commercial ally." Venezuela sends its largest quota of exported energy to the US and in turn imports many products from the US to address the country's scarcity problems. Finally, Nicolás Maduro's government revoked CNN's working

credentials, accusing the network of "violating Venezuelan laws," only to renew them 24 hours later, inviting CNN to return to the country. The governments of other countries in the region have also expressed either support or concern regarding the situation in Venezuela.

12) What is the role of social movements in Venezuela at this juncture?

During the last 15 years social movements have suffered from a policy of active state intervention that has diminished and divided them and often resulted in their being coopted. Lamentably, the few groups that have persevered with some degree of autonomy—for example a few labor unions—are too weak to have any real impact on the current situation.