

Perón, Pinochet and Patience, by Jorge I. Domínguez and Steven Levitsky

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Venezuela is in its worst political crisis since the establishment of its constitutional democracy in 1958. At stake is not only Hugo Chávez's presidency, but the ability of any democratic leader to govern in the future. Public opinion polls show that most Venezuelans want Mr. Chávez out of office. They have good reasons. Since Mr. Chávez's election in 1998, his administration has mismanaged the economy, fomented violence and concentrated power, threatening Venezuela's core democratic institutions.

In response, a coalition of opposition parties, unions and business leaders has held a crippling general strike for nearly two months that has emptied store shelves, paralyzed the oil industry and pushed the country to the brink of civil war. Opposition leaders have vowed to continue the strike until their demands for Mr. Chávez's immediate resignation and new elections are met.

Such a disruptive strategy is misguided. It has not only inflicted enormous damage on Venezuela's economy and democracy, it has weakened the opposition itself. Laying siege to the government plays into Mr. Chávez's own strategy of rallying his supporters by polarizing the country along class lines. Even if the strike succeeds in forcing Mr. Chávez to resign or in provoking a military coup, such a victory would likely be Pyrrhic. The opposition could lose a new election. It is highly fragmented, and none of its potential presidential candidates enjoys broad public support. If faced with multiple challengers, Mr. Chávez might win again.

Were the opposition to succeed in a new election, it would still not be guaranteed the ability to govern. Mr. Chávez retains the intense support of an important minority of Venezuelans, concentrated among the poor. If he were forcibly removed, his supporters would not accept the legitimacy of a new government and would work to undermine it. Post-Chávez Venezuela would be as ungovernable as it is today.

Argentine history offers lessons about the consequences of trying to save democracy by going around the constitution. The 1955 coup against Juan Perón, a semi-autocratic populist much like Mr. Chávez, did not bring about a return to stable constitutional rule. Those who supported Perón denied the legitimacy of all successor governments and worked actively — and at times violently — to bring them down. Those against Perón fought back. Three more presidents fell victim to coups. More than 30 years passed before another elected president completed his mandate.

Fortunately, there is an alternative model: Chile. During the mid-1980's, after protests failed to topple the dictator Augusto Pinochet, Chilean democrats embarked on a different course. The opposition decided to abide by Chile's Constitution and wait for a plebiscite in 1988 to determine whether General Pinochet would step down. Opposition parties used the time to build a broad coalition and organized an ultimately victorious campaign. Because the plebiscite had been General Pinochet's idea and was run according to his rules, he stepped down. Chile became one of Latin America's most successful democracies.

The Venezuelan opposition can follow suit. Mr. Chávez's 1999 Constitution allows for a binding referendum to remove the president at midterm, or in August 2003. If Mr. Chávez were to be voted down, a new presidential election would be held within 30 days.

Thus far, the opposition has refused to wait until August. It should reconsider. The opposition could use the next seven months to organize an effective campaign and agree upon a single candidate for future presidential elections. In playing by the rules, the opposition would also be able to maintain the domestic and international legitimacy that it forfeited with a failed coup in April 2002.

Unlike a forced resignation, a recall election would be constitutional and more peaceful. Mr. Chávez's electoral defeat would most likely demobilize, rather than antagonize, his supporters. While Mr. Chávez might try to cancel or steal the election, he would do so at enormous cost. The 2002 coup attempt gained Mr. Chávez widespread support among Latin American governments. A blatant move by Mr. Chávez to disregard his own Constitution and block a free vote would have the opposite effect. Most Latin American countries would turn against him and weaken his already fractured government, opening the way to impeachment.

As Argentina's postwar history makes clear, when politicians temporarily suspend democratic rules of the game during crises, they risk weakening democracy to the point of collapse. A constitutional solution is the best means of preserving Venezuelan democracy. It would also benefit Latin America. Recent years have brought tough economic times, which in turn have posed a threat to democracy in the region. The forced removal of presidents in Ecuador and Argentina suggests a possible trend in which mass protest serves as a somehow more acceptable form of coup d'état. Mr. Chávez's forced removal would only reinforce this, making fragile governments all the more vulnerable.

The Venezuelan opposition should be patient. As former President Jimmy Carter recently proposed, the opposition should lift the general strike and abandon current efforts to remove the president in exchange for an agreement with the Chávez government to choose the day for an internationally monitored referendum in August. If the opposition were to force Mr. Chávez's removal before that, it would risk ushering in a cycle of polarization and violence that could grip the country for years. Avoiding this and saving Venezuela's constitutional democracy is well worth waiting eight months.

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