



# COVID-19 and Possibilities for Transition in Venezuela

A Discussion Paper by Maryhen Jiménez

Among the countries most vulnerable to the arrival of COVID-19 is Venezuela. The collapse of the economy and public services, non-existent fiscal capacity, growing authoritarianism, a precarious health system, a humanitarian emergency, human rights violations, repression, the presence of irregular groups, and censorship already create profound challenges for the daily survival of the population. Additionally, levels of uncertainty and emergency vary greatly throughout the country. The pandemic threatens the lives of citizens because they do not have a state that can protect them and guarantee access to food or systems of health or safety, among many other things. In fact, according to the World Food Programme, Venezuela suffers from a food crisis and is at risk of famine as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic. COVID-19, furthermore, is surging at a moment when efforts to initiate a democratic transition in Venezuela are being made by the opposition party with the support of the United States, the majority of Latin American countries, and the European Union. What are the odds of a transition in this context?

The opposition leadership has tried on numerous occasions to initiate a process of political change, so far without success. Since December 2015, when the opposition coalition won control of the National Assembly by a qualified majority, there has been a deepening of the authoritarianism led by Nicolás Maduro. Progressively, civic spaces have continued to shrink, increasing repression of political leadership, political persecution, the criminalization of protests, and the violation of the human rights of the Venezuelan people. In addition, the context of the pandemic has served as a pretext to further repress and control the population. There has been a strong militarization of the health sector and in general an increase in the military's presence in daily life. Journalists, human rights defenders, and even health personnel have been persecuted after demanding accountability and transparency in the management of COVID-19. On the other

hand, the National Assembly and its leadership have been the victims of continued systematic persecution and harassment. In this context, the ability to articulate and mobilize in these times for political change is difficult.

In the midst of the country's multilevel crisis, it should be noted that there is a sense of urgency within the humanitarian emergency. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and its Special Rapporteur on Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights have stressed their concern about "the effects of the pandemic given the situation of extreme vulnerability of Venezuelans due to the deep and prolonged humanitarian crisis in Venezuela." UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet have also warned that sanctions on Venezuela may aggravate the country's situation, the deterioration of which, they highlight, dates back prior to those sanctions. Similarly, different actors in Venezuelan civil society and human rights organizations—national and international—have warned about the situation of risk in which many people find themselves, as they do not have access to a health and food system that can serve them. Calls for a humanitarian channel to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in the country have been increasing. For its part, the opposition leadership has tried to increase its means for solidifying political change with support, especially from the United States, and by offering financial support to medical personnel related to COVID-19, called "Health Heroes."

Another point that deserves to be highlighted is the limited framework for action of opposition leadership at the moment. The pandemic has again shown that the one who wields power and control in the country is Nicolás Maduro. Given this situation, the interim government, led by acting President Juan Guaidó, faces new challenges such as (1) uniting an opposition



coalition, (2) pooling popular support, (3) demonstrating that it is a viable option, offering solutions to the population suffering from a humanitarian emergency and COVID-19 inside and outside of the country, and (4) facing the challenge of parliamentary elections that are drawing near. Given these circumstances and the pandemic, it is difficult to see how the opposition can succeed in bringing about political change. With no mobilization, social pressure, or strategic coordination, a transition seems unlikely in these times. While the improvement of socioeconomic and political indicators are linked to a transition, the priority of many people right now is daily survival.

## Recommendations

- Prioritize management of the COVID-19 crisis because the population is extremely vulnerable. It is important to increase regional and international efforts to provide the country the humanitarian aid and assistance it requires. If that is not done, the prognosis is very serious.
  - Increase regional and international assessment and monitoring efforts to follow up on possible human rights violations and the expansion of autocratic leadership.
  - Support and strengthen civil society organizations in the country that, despite the difficult conditions in which they operate, document and enhance transparency of the evolution of the pandemic and the situation of the population.
  - Monitor and provide assistance to Venezuela's migrant population in the region and citizens returning to Venezuela. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has already confirmed the state of extreme vulnerability of displaced persons and the differential impact of this phenomenon on women and girls. It is also, then, necessary to increase support and assistance to countries in the region with a larger number of migrants in such a way as to guarantee them all their rights, without discrimination, and to monitor the situation of those returning, specifically due to the discriminatory treatment they have faced from the Maduro government.
- Rule out violent avenues for pursuing political change and support negotiating initiatives that have a clear methodology and legitimacy between the parties, such as that provided by Norway. Such negotiations should be supported by international actors with a particular interest in the country. In addition, ensure access between facilitators and organized civil society so they have a technical and systematized view of the multiple conflicts in Venezuela. Only an inclusive transition that has the support of as many actors as possible can generate the stability necessary to make way for a sustainable transition.
  - Stress the need for coherent, strategic, and multilateral international pressure that facilitates a negotiation process that can lead to a democratic transition.
  - Promote spaces for dialogue between citizens and opportunities for exchanges that reduce high levels of conflict, polarization, and radicalization.
  - Encourage the study and dissemination of knowledge on transitions to democracy, reconstruction processes in postconflict contexts, and reconciliation. It is essential to promote a discussion with content that also helps to manage expectations about the country's future.



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