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## *Issue Brief*

# Venezuela's Political Crisis: Continuing Chaos

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## **S***ummary*

There seems to be no end in sight to the political and economic turmoil unfolding in Venezuela. While the willingness of the Maduro regime to silence the opposition is cause for concern, far more worrying, however, is the prospect of the new Constituent Assembly initiating a process of rewriting the Constitution to eliminate the last vestiges of democratic checks and balances. Maduro has already made clear his intention to render the National Assembly impotent and perhaps even dissolve it. The new Constituent Assembly may well take the first steps towards achieving this goal. Yet, the Venezuelan opposition, despite the odds ranged against it, has shown no sign of being willing to back down from confronting the government.

On 30 July 2017, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro claimed “victory” in an election to create a Constituent Assembly. The hitherto reliable National Electoral Council claimed that a total of 8,089,230 persons voted in the election – a 41.53 per cent turnout.<sup>1</sup> The credibility of this statement was dealt a severe blow when Antonio Mugica, the CEO of **Smartmatic**, the firm that provided the electoral voting machines, stated:

“It is, therefore, with the deepest regret that we have to report that the turnout figures on Sunday, 30 July, for the Constituent Assembly in Venezuela were tampered with.”<sup>2</sup>

This apparent subversion of the electoral process is the latest in a series of missteps that have undermined the already tarnished democratic credentials of President Maduro. On 3 August 2017, Venezuela’s Chief Prosecutor, Luisa Ortega (a former supporter and ally of Maduro’s predecessor and ideological mentor the late Hugo Chavez) called for an independent audit of the vote and requested that a preliminary proceedings court suspend the inauguration of the Constituent Assembly pending the outcome of an investigation being conducted by the state prosecutor’s office.<sup>3</sup> The inauguration of the Constituent Assembly, it appears, , nonetheless, went ahead, with the Chief Prosecutor’s office placed under a *de facto* lockdown.<sup>4</sup> On 5 August 2017, the new Constituent Assembly sacked Ms. Ortega.<sup>5</sup> It is probable that the Constituent Assembly and a Supreme Court loyal to the current regime will seek to initiate proceedings against Ms. Ortega and discontinue any investigations into the 30 January polls.

Criticism has been almost universal, with only Nicaragua, Cuba and Bolivia offering verbal support to Maduro while Russia’s statement was, at best, a lukewarm gesture. Even the Vatican, which had in April 2017 proposed mediation between the Venezuelan government and the Opposition – the country being 71 per cent Catholic

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1 “Tibisay Lucena: Participaron 8 millones 89 mil 320 electores en la elección Constituyente,” *Panorama*, 30 July 2017, at <http://www.panorama.com.ve/politicayeconomia/Tibisay-Lucena-Participacion-fue-de-41.53-mas-de-8-millones-de-electores--20170730-0087.html> (Accessed 2 August 2017).

2 “Voting machine firm: Venezuela vote rigged “without any doubt”,” *Associated Press via CBS News*, 2 August 2017, at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/venezuela-nicolas-maduros-constituent-assembly-vote-inflated-smartmatic/> (Accessed 2 August 2017).

3 “Venezuela court asked to suspend inauguration of assembly,” *BBC World*, 3 August 2017, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-40822079> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

4 S. Brodzinsky, “Venezuela crisis: loyalist assembly inaugurated amid Vatican criticism,” *The Guardian*, 4 August 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/04/venezuela-nicolas-maduro-vatican-assembly> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

5 J. Hanna, F. Charner & L. Santiago, “New Venezuelan assembly ousts attorney general Ortega,” *CNN*, 5 August 2017 at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/05/americas/venezuela-attorney-general/index.html> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

– has condemned the July 30 vote and the subsequent rush to inauguration.<sup>6</sup> With over 125 people – mainly civilians opposed to the Maduro government – having been killed over the last four months in ongoing protests against the regime, it is difficult to see any scope for reconciliation and mediation.<sup>7</sup>

### Roots of Discord – Economy in Crisis

Venezuela's economic decline has been nothing short of catastrophic. The economy shrank at a rate of eight per cent in 2016 and, by the end of 2017, will be 23 per cent smaller than it was in 2013. In addition, the inflation rate is at least 481 per cent, while unemployment exceeds 17 per cent and is approaching 20.<sup>8</sup> There are extensive shortages of medicines and the ability of many wage-earners to buy food is doubtful.<sup>9</sup>

Venezuela is one of the world's largest oil producers and, like many such countries, had an economy heavily dependent on global oil prices. Oil accounts for 90 per cent of the country's exports and half of the government's revenue. As such, the economy is highly vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices especially if steps are not taken to bolster and secure foreign exchange reserves.<sup>10</sup> Under the Presidency of the late Hugo Chavez (1999 to 2013), oil prices hovered near record highs, often exceeding USD 100 per barrel. Since 2015, however, oil prices have plummeted with devastating consequences for Venezuela's economy.<sup>11</sup>

Chavez was a self-styled socialist and his economic policies were geared towards addressing the high degree of economic inequality in Venezuela. He pursued an avowedly re-distributive economic agenda along with extensive social welfare programmes. These undoubtedly had a positive effect as health care and even food

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6 "Pope proposes Vatican mediation in Venezuela crisis," *Al Jazeera*, 30 April 2017, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/news/2017/04/pope-proposes-vatican-mediation-venezuela-crisis-170430075913312.html> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

7 J. Sterling, F. Charner & P. Gillespie, "Deadly election day in Venezuela as protesters clash with troops," *CNN*, 30 July 2017, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/30/americas/venezuela-on-edge-vote/index.html> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

8 "Venezuela's worst economic crisis: What went wrong?" *Al Jazeera*, 3 May 2017, at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/05/venezuela-worst-economic-crisis-wrong-170501063130120.html> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

9 S. Pozzebon & P. Gillespie, "Venezuelans are losing weight amid food shortages, skyrocketing prices," *CNN*, 3 May 2017, at <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/03/news/economy/venezuela-food-prices/index.html> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

10 "How Chávez and Maduro have impoverished Venezuela," *The Economist*, 6 April 2017, at <https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21720289-over-past-year-74-venezuelans-lost-average-87kg-weight-how> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

11 R. Sanchez, "Venezuela: How paradise got lost," *CNN*, 21 April 2017, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/21/americas/venezuela-crisis-explained/index.html> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

was heavily subsidized, contributing to a two-thirds decline in poverty by 2010.<sup>12</sup> These programmes, while sustainable when government revenues were abundant, became far less workable once oil prices fell.

In large part, the problems of declining revenue were exacerbated by the government expropriating many private companies, with even powerful multinationals such as General Motors being affected in the process.<sup>13</sup> This effectively destroyed the manufacturing sector and made domestic production uneconomical. Imports filled this void – sustainable when oil prices were high but problematic when prices fell. Attempts at price control have been singularly unsuccessful. The government now controls at least 511 businesses with 70 per cent of these losing money, further contributing to the economic crisis.<sup>14</sup>

Inefficiency has been accompanied by rampant corruption. The state-run oil monopoly - *Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVA)* – is both bloated and corrupt. A probe by the National Assembly in 2016 suggested that as much as USD 11 billion had gone missing.<sup>15</sup> Even the highest levels of the government and the security forces have been affected by corruption and this scourge has been blamed for facilitating an upsurge in cocaine trafficking from neighbouring Colombia.<sup>16</sup>

The Maduro government has sought to blame both US sanctions against top officials and “right-wing” business sabotage for the economic plight facing Venezuelans.<sup>17</sup> This rhetoric only intensified after the incoming Trump Administration imposed sanctions on more top officials.<sup>18</sup> This is, of course, a canard. These sanctions have not targeted Venezuela’s economy in a systematic manner nor has demand for Venezuelan oil been in any way affected. While there may be an intensification of

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12 R. Erlich, “High cost for Venezuela social programs,” *Marketplace*, 2 June 2010, at <https://www.marketplace.org/2010/06/02/world/high-cost-venezuela-social-programs> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

13 “GM Ceases Operation in Venezuela as Plant is Expropriated,” *Fox Business*, 20 April 2017, at <http://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/2017/04/20/general-motors-says-venezuela-illegally-seizes-auto-plant.html> (Accessed 4th August 2017)

14 J. Wyss, “Venezuelan government controls more than 500 businesses — and most are losing money,” *Miami Herald*, 14 March 2017, at <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article138402248.html> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

15 A. Cawthorne, “PDVSA manager arrested in Venezuela fuel corruption probe,” *Reuters*, 29 March 2017, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-pdvsa-idUSKBN1702OZ> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

16 N. Ault, “Venezuelan corruption seen aiding South American illegal drug surge,” *Washington Times*, 2 August 2017, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/aug/2/venezuela-seen-aiding-s-america-illegal-drug-surge/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

17 S. Brodzinsky, “Venezuela sanctions: Maduro fumes at ‘imperialists’ as US targets officials,” *The Guardian*, 9 March 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/09/venezuela-recalls-top-envoy-washington-us-sanctions> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

18 “Venezuela’s Maduro blames sanctions on U.S. imperialism,” *TVC News*, 27 July 2017, at <http://tvcnews.tv/2017/07/venezuelas-maduro-blames-sanctions-on-u-s-imperialism/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

sanctions against the Maduro regime, it is unlikely that more potent sanctions aimed at the national economy will be forthcoming.

## Parliamentary Defeat in 2015

Maduro, who succeeded Chavez following the latter's death on 5 March 2013, narrowly won the Presidential Election of 14 April 2013 with a mere 50.6 per cent of the vote, making the 2013 polls the closest Presidential election since 1968.<sup>19</sup> The subsequent economic crisis further eroded his popularity and caused a major electoral defeat for the governing party – [United Socialist Party of Venezuela](#) (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela – PSUV*) – and its allies in the National Assembly elections held on 6 December 2015, which handed opposition forces a two-thirds “supermajority” in the National Assembly.<sup>20</sup> Following that defeat, Maduro has systematically sought to undermine the authority of the National Assembly.

Barely a week after those elections, Maduro created the National Communal Assembly on 15 December 2015.<sup>21</sup> Pledging to grant full powers to this new entity, he made little effort to work with the Opposition controlled National Assembly. And, on 29 March 2017, the country's Supreme Tribunal of Justice (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia – TSJ*), which was controlled by the *Chavista* supporters of Maduro attempted to usurp the powers of the National Assembly and even dissolve it.<sup>22</sup> After intense protests, the TSJ was forced to rescind its decision on 1 April 2017, but any hopes of reconciliation and an easing of political tensions were soon dashed as protests against the Maduro administration continued unabated.<sup>23</sup> The unrest was worsened by the frequent detention (often followed by the release under house arrest) of opposition leaders such as Antonio Ledezama and Leopoldo Lopez.<sup>24</sup> The Maduro

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19 “Nicolas Maduro sworn in as new Venezuelan president,” *BBC*, 19 April 2013, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-22220526> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

20 “Venezuela election: opposition coalition secures 'supermajority',” *The Guardian*, 9 December 2015, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/09/venezuela-election-opposition-coalition-secures-supermajority> (Accessed 2 August 2017).

21 “After losing control of Parliament, Venezuelan socialists create a new one,” *Fox News*, 16 December 2015, at <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/12/16/after-losing-control-congress-venezuelan-socialists-create-new-one.html> (Accessed 2 August 2017).

22 R. Romo “Venezuela's high court dissolves National Assembly,” *CNN*, 30 March 2017, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/30/americas/venezuela-dissolves-national-assembly/> (Accessed 2 August 2017).

23 J. Slotkin, “Venezuela's Top Court And President Reverse Course, Restore Powers To Legislature,” *National Public Radio*, 1 April 2017, at <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/01/522307795/venezuelas-top-court-and-president-reverse-course-restore-powers-to-legislature> (Accessed 2 August 2017).

24 D. Burke, “Venezuelan opposition leader is returned home just three days after he was dramatically arrested and spirited away following controversial election,” *Daily Mail*, 4 August 2017, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4760684/Arrested-Venezuelan-opposition-leader-returned-home.html> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

government has also shown no hesitation in using force against the opposition with heavy casualties being sustained by anti-government protestors.

## Subverting Institutions

The TSJ was the product of a successful attempt by the Chavez administration to rewrite the constitution in 1999. While its processes and independence are supposedly guaranteed by Article 264 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (this change in the country's name being another Chavez inspired flourish), and by Article V of the Organic Law of the Supreme Court (LOTSJ), concerns have been raised that the Maduro government has disregarded these safeguards and staffed the TSJ with supporters of the government.<sup>25</sup> The effect of this subversion can be seen in the attempt by the TSJ to usurp the powers of the National Assembly. Furthermore, with the TSJ subverted and the National Assembly rendered impotent it was only a matter of time before Chief Prosecutor Luisa Ortega became a target. She was removed from office on 5 August.<sup>26</sup>

The Venezuelan armed forces, one of the best-equipped in South America, have also been subverted with several senior officers being removed in the wake of an abortive coup against Chavez in 2002.<sup>27</sup> However, the subversion of the military did not simply involve removing officers whose loyalty was suspect. Rather, the military was co-opted into the government ignoring a growing nexus between the military and other security agencies, on one hand, and narcotics-traffickers, on the other.<sup>28</sup> Maduro further co-opted the military by placing military officers in charge of everything from food distribution to new oil and mining projects.<sup>29</sup> Of the 32 members of the Maduro Cabinet, 13 are from the military, and of the 20 "Chavista" governors 11 are military personnel.<sup>30</sup> In a real sense, the Maduro administration is a civil-

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25 José Ignacio Hernández, "5 violaciones cometidas durante la designación de los magistrados del TSJ," *ProDávinci*, 23 December 2015, at <http://prodavinci.com/blogs/5-violaciones-cometidas-durante-la-designacion-de-los-magistrados-del-tsj-por-jose-i-hernandez/> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

26 "Luisa Ortega: Venezuela's chief prosecutor," *BBC*, 3 August 2017, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-40812321> (Accessed 4 August 2017).

27 J. O. Tamayo, "Chávez purging military after coup," *The Miami Herald*, 19 May 2002, at <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/venezuela/purging.htm> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

28 C. Woody, "The US government is zeroing in on a suspected 'global hub of drug trafficking'," *Business Insider*, 3 August 2016, at <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-indicts-venezuela-officials-drug-trafficking-2016-8> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

29 H. LaFranchi, "Venezuela's Maduro confronts perils of his reliance on the military," *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 June 2017, at <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2017/0622/Venezuela-s-Maduro-confronts-perils-of-his-reliance-on-the-military> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

30 J.C. Hidalgo, "Six Reasons Venezuela's Dictator Maduro Will Survive," *Newsweek*, 2 August 2017, at <http://www.newsweek.com/six-reasons-venezuelas-dictator-maduro-will-survive-644840> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

military partnership, with elites from both sides reaping benefits despite the unfolding chaos.

### Is a Military Coup Feasible?

At present, given a defanged opposition and the willingness of the Maduro government to use deadly force for quelling protests, the question arises as to whether there are prospects of a military coup. While the Maduro government has co-opted senior officers into the government, the threat to the government may not be found among the members of the General Staff but rather among the so-called “Comacates” – junior and mid-level officers ranging from Lieutenants to Colonels (Hugo Chavez himself was a Lieutenant Colonel of Paratroopers when he launched the attempted coup known as Operation Zamora in 1992). Less well-paid than senior officers and having to suffer the attendant privations caused by the economic crisis, and with army units now supporting the police and the *Guardia Nacional de Venezuela* internal security troops in enforcing the crackdown against anti-government protestors, the loyalty of the armed forces may become severely tested as they face the brunt of the public fury while at the same time facing appeals from the opposition not to obey “illegitimate orders”.<sup>31</sup> So far, no overt signs of dissent are visible, although it appears that junior officers and non-commissioned officers are fully aware of the dilemma that they face.<sup>32</sup>

However, even if there was a desire to overthrow the Maduro government, coup plotters would be wary given the precedents of Chavez’s failed attempt in February 1992, a subsequent effort on the part of officers loyal to him in November 1992, and the later attempt against Chavez himself in 2002. On those occasions, it became clear that the ringleaders had overestimated both the support they enjoyed within the military as well as the extent to which they might be resisted. It should be noted that the Venezuelan armed forces have not staged a successful coup d’état since 1958, when, curiously enough, they did so in alliance with the civilian opposition to remove a dictator.

In analysing any prospective military move against the Maduro government, the role of the National Bolivarian Militia of Venezuela has to be considered. Formed by Chavez, the militia has been used to suppress dissent in the past and its members,

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31 M. Zuñiga and N. Miroff, “Government opponents appeal to Venezuela’s military as chaos grows,” *Washington Post*, 22 April 2017, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/venezuelas-demonstrators-appeal-to-the-military-as-chaos-grows/2017/04/21/17dec8-23af-11e7-928e-3624539060e8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/venezuelas-demonstrators-appeal-to-the-military-as-chaos-grows/2017/04/21/17dec8-23af-11e7-928e-3624539060e8_story.html) (Accessed 5 August 2017).

32 G. Gupta & A. Polanco, “All eyes on Venezuela military after protests, vote,” *Reuters*, 1 August 2017, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-military-idUSKBN1AH5GC> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

numbering perhaps in the hundreds of thousands, are armed.<sup>33</sup> To these must be added the well-trained operatives of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (*Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN*), which has shown itself to be highly proficient at conducting surveillance on the opponents of the regime.<sup>34</sup>

Into this mix must be thrown a contingent of Cuban troops stationed in Venezuela. The Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, suggested that as many as 15,000 Cubans are in Venezuela, although it is very unlikely that these are all military personnel.<sup>35</sup> It is of interest, however, that Joaquín Quintas Solá, the General of the Cuban Army Corps (*General de Cuerpo de Ejército*), and a veteran of the South African Border War, was present at Venezuela's Zamora 200 military exercises undertaken in January 2017 which were ostensibly to prepare for an "imperialist invasion."<sup>36</sup>

Yet, despite the possibility of the militia, SEBIN and even the Cuban contingent resisting a military coup, such resistance could be overcome if senior officers or "comacates" are able to mobilize a sizeable and coherent force. Such an outcome is, however, contingent upon those elements of the armed forces not overtly supporting a coup remaining neutral or offering only passive support – precisely the reason for the failure of the 1992 and 2002 coups. The militia's military potential may be severely overestimated, with some reports suggesting that only 10,000 to 20,000 members are deemed to be combat ready.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, it is likely that any coup attempt, no matter how well supported, will be met with armed resistance.

Yet, it should be noted that on 27<sup>th</sup> June 2017, a somewhat farcical aerial assault was carried out by a rogue police officer – Oscar Perez – using a hijacked police MBB Bo.105 helicopter. After firing small arms at the Interior Ministry building and dropping grenades on the TSJ, Perez remains at large and has been seen at protest

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33 I. Munera, "Los guardianes de la revolución," *El Mundo*, 25 February 2014, at <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2014/02/24/530ba27c268e3e5f388b4581.html> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

34 "Netizen Report: Leaked Documents Reveal Egregious Abuse of Power by Venezuela in Twitter Arrests," *Mediashift.org*, 17 July 2015, at <http://mediashift.org/2015/07/netizen-report-leaked-documents-reveal-egregious-abuse-of-power-by-venezuela-in-twitter-arrests/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

35 O. Avendano, "Cuba Has "Occupying Army" in Venezuela, OAS Secretary General Claims," *Panam Post*, 20 July 2017, at <https://panampost.com/orlando-avendano/2017/07/20/cuba-has-occupying-army-in-venezuela/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

36 S. Martin, "Cuban Army Officers Take Part in Venezuela's Military Drills for "Imperialist Invasion"," *Panam Post*, 16 January 2017, at <https://panampost.com/sabrina-martin/2017/01/16/cuban-army-officers-take-part-in-venezuelas-military-drills-for-imperialist-invasion/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

37 "Separating Fact from Fiction: An Analysis of Venezuela's Military Power," *Council On Hemispheric Affairs*, 13 May 2009, at <http://www.coha.org/separating-fact-from-fiction-an-analysis-of-venezuela%E2%80%99s-military-power/> (Accessed 5 August 2017).



meetings. But this attempt cannot be seen as an indication of a military coup, though it could point to signs of growing unease within the police force.<sup>38</sup>

A somewhat more troubling sign for the Maduro regime might be the small military uprising that took place on 6 August 2017 at the small Paramacay military base in the city of Valencia. While this was quickly quelled, the alleged leader of the uprising, former *Guardia Nacional* Captain Juan Carlos Caguaripano, termed his attempt as “civic and military actions to restore constitutional order”. Some reports also suggest that weapons have gone missing from the base. The uprising reinvigorated street protests against the Maduro regime, leading to further rigorous attempts by internal security forces to maintain order.<sup>39</sup> It would be highly premature to suggest that this small uprising is a portent of violent revolt within the armed forces, but it could be a sign that Maduro’s control of the armed forces is not absolute.

### Is the Opposition a Credible Alternative?

Venezuela’s opposition coalition – the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) – has been painted by apologists for the Maduro regime and those ideologically sympathetic to its socialist policies as being a right-wing alliance unable to attract voters outside the middle-classes.<sup>40</sup> While it is undoubtedly true that Chavez’s populist and redistributive policies were welcomed by a large proportion of the population, it is equally true that Chavez’s economic legacy now lies broken as the programmes and assistance upon which poor Venezuelans depended have now all but collapsed. In some ways, the credibility of the opposition as an alternative is a moot point.

At present, the opposition already controls the National Assembly and its candidate came extremely close to defeating Maduro in the 2013 Presidential election. The class divisions and economic inequalities that enabled Hugo Chavez to become President now have less resonance in an atmosphere marked by endemic shortages of basic commodities, hyper-inflation and economic decline. In these circumstances, the credibility of the opposition may be less important than the apparent inability of the Maduro regime to address basic issues and stabilise the economy. It is difficult to

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38 T. Demerly, “Helicopter Attack in Venezuela Mimics Failed 2016 Turkish,” *The Aviationist*, 28 June 2017, at <https://theaviationist.com/2017/06/28/hijacked-helicopter-launches-bizarre-attack-on-venezuelan-government-installations-in-alleged-coup-attempt/> (Accessed 6 August 2017).

39 P. Mazzei, “Venezuela quells anti-government uprising on military base,” *Miami Herald*, 6 August 2017, at <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article165735027.html> (Accessed 6 August 2017).

40 O. Guardiola-Rivera, “The problem for Venezuelans: Maduro’s opposition would provide no relief,” *The Guardian*, 3 August 2017, at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/03/venezuelans-maduro-opposition-election-street-protests> (Accessed 5 August 2017).

see what Maduro's loyal Constituent Assembly will be able to do to improve the economy.

## **Conclusion**

There seems to be no end in sight to the political and economic turmoil unfolding in Venezuela. While the willingness of the Maduro regime to silence the opposition is cause for concern, far more worrying, however, is the prospect of the new Constituent Assembly initiating a process of rewriting the Constitution to eliminate the last vestiges of democratic checks and balances. Maduro has already made clear his intention to render the National Assembly impotent and perhaps even dissolve it. The new Constituent Assembly may well take the first steps towards achieving this goal. Yet, the Venezuelan opposition, despite the odds ranged against it, has shown no sign of being willing to back down from confronting the government. As the government's use of force becomes ever more harsh and widespread, it is probable that more non-partisan Venezuelans may find themselves alienated from the Maduro regime. However, old divisions caused by socio-economic inequalities may prove to be remarkably resilient and ensure that Maduro's regime may retain a nucleus of support, which could mean that clashes between opposition supporters and government security forces might degenerate into a clash of classes only nominally aligned to political parties. Whatever happens, it is difficult to see an easy or peaceful solution to Venezuela's political and economic crises.

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