

Venezuela's Struggle to Survive

Amid a reassertion of U.S.-backed neoliberal policies in Latin America, Venezuela's socialist government totters at a tipping point, beset by a severe economic crisis, but Lisa Sullivan sees a ground-up struggle of Venezuelans to survive.

By Lisa Sullivan

For 32 years I have called Venezuela home. Its mountains have given me beauty, its barrios have given me music, its struggles have given me purpose, and its people have given me love. Its Bolivarian Revolution gave me hope.

How could I not feel hope when most of my neighbors –ages 2 to 70, were studying, right in our little potato-growing town in the mountains of western Venezuela. How could I not be hopeful when 18 neighbor families received new homes to replace their unhealthy, crowded living spaces?



How could I not be grateful when my partner received life-saving emergency surgery? Or when my blind friend Chuy had his sight restored. Both for free.

But today, this is what I see from my porch: neighbors digging frantically in barren, already-harvested potato fields, hoping to find a few overlooked little spuds. *Rastreando* they call it. It is an act of desperation to find any food source to keep the kids from crying, because for months, the shelves of the stores have been bare.

How did this happen? That is the question that I bolt awake to every morning.

As I watch Juan Carlos claw the fields for potatoes; as I embrace a tearful Chichila – up and waiting in line since 2 a.m., searching, unsuccessfully, to buy food for her large family; as I see the pounds shed before my eyes from 10-year-old Fabiola. I am glad that my mangos are ripening now. They take some of the empty glare from Fabi's eyes.

It is often in the deep of the night that I am kept awake by the burning question: *When and how will all this end?* Followed by: *And what should I be doing?*

When I keep thinking it can't get any worse, it does. When friends from the U.S. write to ask if they should believe the scary articles about Venezuela's crisis in the press, I *want* to say no. Because I know that global vultures are circling my adopted nation, waiting for us to fall. Venezuela is, after all, home to the planet's largest reserves of oil.

Much of their suspicion of the barrage of articles about Venezuela's crisis is the fact that almost every article begins and ends with the same mantra: Socialism = Hunger. A good example is a recent article in Town Hall entitled: "Venezuelan Socialism Fails at Feeding the Children." The article goes on to elaborate that between 12 and 26 percent of Venezuelans kids are food insecure (depending on their geography), which would average 19.3 percent childhood hunger in the country.

Just for a comparison, I looked up child hunger in the U.S. and found that most sites use the figure one in five. Or 20 percent. So, in the world's most prosperous nation 20 percent of children face hunger, while in Venezuela the number is 19.3 percent. Since these statistics are so close, I suggest that Town Hall publish a more accurate and equally urgent article entitled: "US Capitalism Fails at Feeding the Children, and Venezuelan Socialism Does only Slightly Better."

But most of our caution with these stories comes because we smell danger. How many times have we seen the first step on that well-traveled road to U.S. intervention paved by these heart-wrenching stories rammed 24/7 by the media. They lay the groundwork, help to justify almost anything.

However, in spite of awareness of *why* we are being bombarded with stories of Venezuela's crisis, out of respect for friends, neighbors and family in Venezuela, I must acknowledge that this crisis is real and is brutal. It is a crisis of critical shortages of food and medicine. Its reasons are extremely complex and fall on many shoulders. And it threatens the health, well-being and future of too many Venezuelans today, especially the poorest ones, such as my neighbors.

What Happened?

How did the nation with the world's largest reserves come to this, a nation of hungry and desperate people? Well, that depends on who you ask. The opposition blames President Nicolas Maduro. Maduro blames the U.S. The press blames

socialism. Maduro's ruling party blames capitalism. Economists blame price controls. Businesses blame bureaucracy. Everyone blames corruption.

Most would agree, however, that the underlying culprit is a three letter word. OIL – the source of 95 percent of Venezuela's exports. OIL – the cash cow that funds easy, cheap imports. OIL- the export giant that deters domestic production.

Living in a rural community that actually *does* produce food, and having also traveled extensively in this lush and fertile country, it is sometimes hard to believe that Venezuela imports more than 70 percent of its food. But I shouldn't be surprised. Quite simply, for decades, it has been much cheaper to import food than to produce it.

At least that was the case when oil prices were up. And they were up for a long time. As recently as two years ago, the price of oil was about \$115 per barrel. This February, Venezuelan crude plummeted to barely \$23 a barrel. That is only \$3 more than the approximately \$20 cost of extracting it.

So, when the profit per barrel of oil goes from \$95 to \$3, it's like your salary going from something like \$50,000 a year to \$1,600. Could you feed your household?

Well, if you were wise, you would have saved for a rainy day, or not put all your eggs in one basket, or at least grown some food in your backyard in case you couldn't get to the supermarket. Indeed, the late President Hugo Chavez talked a lot about this. And he even took some steps to set this in motion.

But somehow, economic diversification never happened. Oil became a larger share of the economy under the Bolivarian revolution. Imports grew. Some say this was because Chavez was too preoccupied with the task of providing healthcare, education and shelter to a previously-abandoned household before launching on major home repairs.

Some say because *chavismo* made it very hard for businesses to produce (although in reality, most large businesses in Venezuela don't actually *produce*, they just import things already produced. And, then – to boot – they actually purchase them with dollars provided almost for free by the government.) That puts a little perspective on their rants.

With oil prices crashing to the basement this winter, Venezuela could no longer afford to import food. And to make matters worse, most of the imported trickles of food and medicine that *do* reach Venezuela these days, never actually reach the average person. Especially the average *poor* person. A good chunk of this food and this medicine ends up in the greedy hands of corrupt businesses,

bureaucrats, military, ruling party members, and black-marketers.

Scarcity almost always leads to hoarding and scalping products. But add to that mix the fact that most basic food and medicines are price-controlled by the government. A kilo of corn flour costs about 2 cents at the regulated price, and can easily fetch at \$2 – or much, much more – on the black market. Who wouldn't want to get their hand in this business of hoarding and reselling? Especially considering that the salary of even an engineer hovers around \$30 – \$40 a month.

And I haven't even talked about the dysfunctional currency system that contributes to the diminishing power of salaries. There is only too much bad economic stuff to stomach.

The Harsh Reality

No matter what the reason, the result that matters now is this: Venezuela depends almost totally on imports for most items of basic necessity, and it has almost run out of money to buy these imports, which these days mostly end up in the wrong hands anyway.

Obviously, getting the motors of domestic agriculture and production up and running is the long-term solution. But while all this will take years – perhaps decades – Fabi is hungry.

So, is it true that Venezuela is about to go over the edge? Well, it may, even before I finish this article. My partner just texted to say that roads to our town are blocked with hunger protests and he is returning to the city.

But to me, the extraordinary thing is that Venezuela *has not* exploded until now. This crisis is now several *years* old really, depending on how you measure it.

The fact that the upper echelons of Venezuelan have not exploded is because many have given up on their country and left: two million, mostly young professionals. They are the ones who can qualify for the visas and afford the plane tickets. Some with fewer resources have also left, like those who are paddling to neighboring islands in handmade rafts, including a few whose lifeless bodies drifted to the shores of Aruba.

The fact that those at the lower economic rung have not yet exploded (until now) has different reasons. Venezuelans are an extremely generous people, with a natural sense of solidarity. Whenever those few small spuds are culled from neighboring fields by Rafa, he places a bag of them at my doorstep. I pass bananas to Jenny over my fence. She passes pinto beans to Erica over hers. Erica passes yucca next door to Chichila, Fabi brings me fish that she caught when

skipping school, I provide the oil in which to fry it.

This solidarity and natural bartering system that has unfolded in our Venezuela-in-crisis is beautiful, and it is what has allowed us to survive until now. These good-news stories can't compete with the bad news that the press loves, you have to come and see with your own eyes.

The second reason for delayed explosion is this: Most Venezuelans know that *chavismo* has (or had) their back, and are very reluctant to give it up. President Chavez very concretely and very pro-actively *cared* about them. He reduced poverty dramatically and created the most economically equal society in the Americas.

In contrast, the opposition is widely perceived as caring only about themselves. Probably this is because their only agenda item over the years was to topple the government. Small wonder they rarely won the many national elections over the past 17 years.

The opposition did, however win December's parliamentary elections. Decisively so. But many see this as less a vote of confidence *for* the opposition, than one of punishment *against* the Maduro administration, perceived as tone-deaf to their suffering. Although many share Maduro's belief that the crisis is caused by the right-wing-led economic war, they wonder why he hasn't done more to combat it.

But this is my sense of the moment: The majority of Venezuelans today are not fans of the opposition. *Nor* are they fans of the current administration. However (to the chagrin of the State Department) this doesn't mean that the majority of Venezuelans are not fans of *chavismo*).

Solutions, Anyone?

So, what is to be done? The solutions to the crisis are as conflicting as the causes. The three major players (Venezuelan government, opposition, and the U.S.) spend endless amounts of time and resources pointing fingers of blame to one another, while doing a poor job of hiding their real political and economic interests. Meanwhile, the losers are the people of Venezuela, who grow hungrier and hungrier.

Somewhat better solutions are coming from Latin America itself. The region has become far more integrated and vastly more independent from the U.S. than previously (and many believe this to be Hugo Chavez's greatest legacy). This was clear when OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro tried to set into motion Venezuela's removal from the organization. He received resounding *no* from its members, including those of the new emerging right. Instead, the OAS member states opted to give support to an ongoing process of dialogue between the

government and the opposition. The idea of government-opposition dialogue is not a bad idea. It's just not enough.

The long-term solution to Venezuela's problems must come from all sectors of Venezuela. Not just from two polar opposites who have driven Venezuelans to hunger in their pursuit of political and economic power.

Many, but not all, of those excluded identify with *chavismo*. But there is no political space for them in the tightly controlled hierarchical ruling party structure, nor room for them on the ballot (the largest political party that identifies with *chavismo* was excluded from elections because the electoral board did not like their name.) Some identify more with the opposition, especially certain pragmatic administrators willing to listen to and accommodate ideas from across the aisle.

Most of these in-between sectors, that I believe make up Venezuela's majority, want to see less political rhetoric and more economic action. The currency system must undergo radical change. The poor must be guaranteed access to food, but not by subsidizing the product (which ends up in the hands of the corrupt and not the mouths of the poor), but subsidizing their families.

And finally, there is a treasure trove of creative grassroots initiatives and productive solutions that this crisis has unleashed and that merit attention. While Maduro prays for higher oil prices and markets his nation's pristine lands to Canadian mining companies in a desperate lunge for dollars; and while the U.S. and the Venezuelan opposition push for social explosion and/or military uprising; the people of Venezuela are busy.

They are busy planting food in their backyards and patios, using alternative medicine, sharing with one another, developing a barter system, and creating hundreds, or maybe thousands of products from recycled or locally-sourced renewable sources. These may not totally solve the immediate food crisis but, in the long run, they may actually be opening the door to the kind of society in which we can all survive and thrive.

And back to that 3 a.m. question of what can I do. I guess just more of the same, writing down my thoughts and ripping up more of my lawns to plant food with my neighboring children. Two more hours and I'll be up with the dawn, awaiting Fabi and friends with shovel and hoe in hand.

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