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Venezuela: Government and opponents to resume talks

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The Venezuelan Chavista government [as it is called after its inspirer and founder, Hugo Chávez] and the opposition are resuming discussions. This announcement came a week after assembly member Juan Guaidó had announced he would not resume discussions.

On the contrary, this announcement ratified what President Nicolás Maduro had said when he asserted that dialogues were continuing and that there would be new developments that would finally be confirmed.

The government delegation arrived this morning [July 8] in Barbados to “continue the peace talks sponsored by the government of the Kingdom of Norway and initiated with the Venezuelan opposition on May 14 of this year.” (Telesur, July 8) The roundtable in Barbados is thus the third one involving public contact, within a series of private conversations over several months, as Maduro had said when explaining the genesis of the first steps in Oslo.

The government communiqué also condemned Guaidó’s statements that “promote violence, insult, unconstitutionality and a bipolar rhetoric that does not correspond to the guidelines presented by the sponsors of the discussions and accepted by the parties on May 25, 2019.”

Guaidó announced on Sunday [July 7] that the National Assembly will approve the request to rejoin the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (IATRA) and that they will then “build support from the other countries of the region for this mechanism, whose final approval shall take place in the Organization of American States (OAS).”

IATRA [known as the ‘Rio Treaty’] is an inter-American mutual defense pact signed in 1947, from which Mexico withdrew in 2002 and Venezuela withdrew in 2012, along with Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador. IATRA spells out the option of requesting the formation of a coalition of inter-American forces to conduct a military intervention.

A forked path full of contradictions

In this way, Guaidó announced on the same day that he will both resume discussions and also forge ahead with the interventionist solution to the conflict. Behind this apparent contradiction are the tensions that exist within a heterogeneous opposition regarding their internal disputes. There, the Guaidó grouping needs to contain the different positions, both those that agree with holding discussions and those that propose military force as the only possible solution.

In addition, the announcement of the request to rejoin [and reactivate] IATRA at the OAS is one of the cards that the opposition wants to put on the table when the discussions begin, in order to add greater weight to its balance of power, which is no greater than it was in the first round of talks.

So far, the political moves made by both sectors since the first dialogue was held have yielded a zero sum. There is the same asymmetry of forces in favor of the government at the national level, but with equal strength at the international level.

The IATRA question is a double-edged sword. First of all, it depends on the approval of the OAS, which has been subjected to strong tensions, reaching the point that the Uruguayan delegation withdrew at the 49th General Assembly held in Medellín at the end of June. This act was in response to the recognition of the Guaidó envoy [by OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro], while the Venezuelan government had already made its withdrawal from the organization official.

A second point is joined with that: Is there a real possibility of the formation of a coalition of inter-American forces for a military solution? So far the answer is no, based on an analysis of the main countries that would have to lead the action, particularly the United States, Colombia and Brazil. The IATRA announcement is more of a negotiation bluff, an empty threat — like a card trick — than a real possible action.

Private agenda for Barbados talks

The agenda in Barbados is not public. The official communiqué has indicated that there is a “six-point agenda approved since March of this year.” [Venezuelan] President Maduro, for his part, has announced on several occasions that there is the possibility that early legislative elections could be held this year instead of 2020.

The opposition, in turn, sings a rhetorical chorus with the formula: cessation of “usurpation” [meaning Maduro’s presidency], transitional government, and “free elections.” The first step, i.e., Maduro’s exit, doesn’t seem for the moment to be on the table of possible negotiating points regarding the next steps to be taken.

Could the opposition reach an agreement that does not signify the president’s departure without becoming even more fragmented and without losing its credibility in the eyes of its social base? This is one of the many questions that exist and that explain the always unresolved crisis of the opposition bloc.

Meanwhile, statements by U.S. representatives have reaffirmed support for Guaidó. So have messages from the main U.S. operators, such as National Security Advisor John Bolton, which were directed at the Bolivarian National Armed Force (FANB), particularly at Minister of Defense Vladimir Padrino López. He was reconfirmed in his post by President Maduro last Sunday, July 7. The attempts to break the FANB are a main front where the coup forces focus their strategic attacks in their war of attrition.

Several variables are simultaneously in motion. The government, its allies and international mediators are committed to holding discussions, as demonstrated by the Barbados talks and the arrival in Caracas of Enrique Iglesias, the European Union’s special representative for Venezuela.

The opposition, led by a variety of U.S. government elements, still clings to hopes of a violent way out, while at the same time they are forced to sit down to talk — forced, that is, in view of the huge gap that exists between their plans and the results actually obtained from January to the present.

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