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The official propaganda dissolves into the harsh reality: the rich get richer, the poor stay poor, but they face ever longer queues. [Español](#)



A woman protests in front of a line of Bolivarian National Police during an opposition demonstration in Caracas, Venezuela, Tuesday, June 7, 2016. AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos.

The situation in Venezuela defies the classic concept of crisis. Among other reasons, because a very different kind of society – maybe better, maybe worse - is expected to emerge. In any case, a profound mutation, possibly a transcendental one, is under way.

"We have developed here a complex revolutionary process, where a terribly corrupt and a-political clique has ended up taking power. A cave-dwelling gang who has robbed the Venezuelan working class ten times the value of their work. If anyone in the world has been able to carry out such an outrage, he should come out and say it." This has been written recently by Roland Denis, philosopher, social activist and deputy minister in the early governments of Hugo Chávez (*Aporrea*, 19.05.16).

It is as easy to put the blame for the current situation in Venezuela on external and domestic enemies of the Bolivarian process - indeed, there are many -, as it is difficult to accept the gibberish that has been mounting over the years. There is no gas. Although there is a state monopoly which produces and exports oil. No cement either. Unfathomable, because the factories, all state-owned, are currently working and producing. No doubt the mafias divert production for the benefit of old and new elites with enough clout to do so: power plots that Denis describes as "thieves' dens", involving different actors, from new and old mafias to the military, the police and members of the ruling party. These plots get reproduced in every corner of society, up and down the country, because it has become commonplace to do things for personal gain without taking anything else into consideration, disregarding the fact that we live in something which used to be called society.

The military

General Cliver Alcalá (retired) was a member of the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200. He was appointed Commander by Hugo Chávez and became Minister of the Strategic Region for Central Integral Development. He appeared recently on Globovisión (18.05.16) saying that he would "vote for the recall" (the referendum that could decide the continuity or the dismissal of Nicolás Maduro) "to avoid a confrontation among the people."

He is a military man faithful to Chávez, with a large audience within the armed forces, who is now distancing himself from the government. "Chávez's legacy prevails, but Maduro has managed it very badly," he said. On the so-called economic war of the empire, which the president blames for the shortages, the retired general said that it does exist, but that it is "generated by the inordinate amount of bureaucratic procedures and the discretionary power enjoyed by public servants, creating a currency exchange differential that fuels corruption."

Such statements, by a general who is a proud *Chavista*, should be understood as a missile against the government and a demonstration that there exists an anti-Maduro *Chavista* sensitivity. As Roland Denis points out, "there appears to be a born-again profane messianism that is able to channel a brand of Chavism that is desperate at the total breakdown of the government which claims to represent it."

Cliver Alcalá fears that an "explosion" is possible because of the lack of food and corruption. He is betting on Maduro's exit to unite *Chavismo*, thus recognizing the existing division in the ranks of those who support the Bolivarian process.

Two facts seem undeniable. The first is that the military are divided: not all of them support the government, although dissidents do not necessarily align themselves with the opposition. The same applies to a sizeable number of *Chavistas*, as can be ascertained in the streets, in the queues and in family conversations. Chavists who are critical of the current government do not want to side with a discourse that blames it all on the Right, the media and imperialism - a staved-in, worn-out argument.

An emerging third option between the government and the opposition is thus seeking, in Alcalá's words, "the reunion of *Chavismo*". This trend appears to be thinking more in the medium term than the immediate present, trying to keep the legacy of Chávez from being squandered and its forces from being dispersed into multiple currents. Its project is based on keeping at a safe distance from the current government and, as the general's statements make it clear, on deposing Maduro.

Explosion

Since the *Caracazo* in February 1989, the possibility social outbreaks happening in Venezuela certainly exists. A few weeks ago, in the city of Barquisimeto, I was able to witness first-hand two events. In front of a cooperative that distributes food with regulated prices a crowd gathered, composed mostly of elderly people, who demanded quotas. Some individuals, who were trying to push them into breaking in and looting the premises, were identified by the cooperators as opposition members.

In the huge queues that get formed at the Cecosesola fairs (the Central Cooperative of Social Services of the region of Lara), between five and ten thousand people line up. They are often impatient, either because of the long wait or because the *bachaqueros* (illegal traffickers) jump the queue. Someone shouted: "Loot!".

A burly gentleman grabbed the door and said loudly: "There will be no looting." The crowd seemed to be relieved. However, everyone will tell you that a little looting goes on, particularly in small convenience stores, that does not usually get reported by the media.

It is obvious that the opposition wants and encourages popular uprisings. But it is also clear that the population does not follow them, at least in this sort of methods. One of the greatest legacies of *Chavismo* is that it strengthened the self-esteem of the popular sectors and fostered their politicization. People know what this is all about and seem

aware that they must avoid violent situations, not to give a chance to solutions that are not going to favour them.

Fortunately, Roland Denis mentioned the Syrian scenario as a possible way out. I say fortunately, because it is obvious that this is the worst possible scenario for the people in this part of the world, though perhaps it is one wished for by the US Southern Command think tanks. The fall of the government would be just a step on the road to something bigger: "As in Syria, blood and despair would make any option of liberation impossible," Denis notes.

What government propaganda does not say is that the empire is used to negotiating with corrupt leaderships (and it founds its power on this), but there is little it can do before crowds determined to assert their rights. The powerful, even the progressives, "will take their planes and dollars expropriated from the public wealth to reach and settle in the apartments and villas they have already bought in Europe and the United States. But it is us who will provide the hundreds of thousands deaths that will follow."

Did the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez not fly to the Dominican Republic and end up in Spain protected by the dictator Francisco Franco, when a popular uprising and a military uprising removed him from power in 1958?

Yes we can

"I have discovered why people like queuing," says a small boy to his mother. During the long hours spent standing in the queue he made some friends, he interacted with people who offered him *arepas* and fruit juice, they talked, they shared, they had a great time. Every day, in all the queues, you can see touching gestures of generosity.

Just as strong tendencies towards decomposition exist, other tendencies anchored in solidarity move in the opposite direction, thus maintaining social cohesion. Today, in Venezuela, many food staples are being produced and, in some areas, vegetables and fruit are plentiful. The Cecosesola fairs are a good example. A tour of the stalls on different days is enough to convince you of the abundance of bananas, papayas, mangoes, pineapples and other tropical fruits. There is no lack of tomatoes, or of any of the main vegetables.

Another issue is the price. In any case, the 300 crates in the three fairs I visited, food was in adequate quantity.

The main problem has to do with the products with regulated prices - especially cornmeal for making *arepas*, and also pasta, sugar, oil and, notably, milk. Regulated-price products are in short supply, and they can be found in the parallel market at prices 10 to 50 times higher.

Another tour of some rural villages in the states of Lara and Trujillo allows you to meet farmers who grow and harvest large quantities of vegetables. They are facing many problems: lack of seeds, shortage of supplies, enormous transportation difficulties to carry their production to the fairs, because transport needs tires (which are not available or only at inordinate prices) and because there are no spare parts for cars and trucks. In the city, huge queues of cars are formed to buy batteries - a permanent queue, several blocks long, where drivers sleep in their cars waiting for their turn.

The country is still producing, for sure, even though queues consume a considerable amount of social energy that is diverted from production. Nationalized factories produce less and less, much less than when they were in private hands. This is the case, for example, of the Mexican cement plants, or the Siderúrgica del Orinoco (Sidor), which was re-nationalized in 2008 after a long union conflict. Its production reached the 4.3 million tons of steel mark, but it dropped to 1.3 million tons in 2014, 29% of its capacity.

It is sad to see that when Sidor belonged to the Argentine group Techint, it produced 3.5 times more than under state management. The union itself acknowledged that funds are being siphoned off, there is a lack of spare parts and raw materials, and no audits. Somehow, inefficiency and corruption, at all levels, combine to produce the situation the country finds itself in.

Pests and classes

A simple tour of the city, from east to west, and vice versa, allows you to see how all the official propaganda dissolves into the harsh reality: the rich are living increasingly better, the poor continue as usual, and on top of this they also do very long queues.

The eastern part of the city looks stylish, with wide green spaces and trees. Through its avenues, you can see new cars passing by and many recently-built apartment buildings. It is striking that in the midst of a crisis, with cement shortages, shopping centres, apartment buildings, and luxury hotels keep on getting built. This is the same sort of city you can find in all upper middle class areas in the continent.

The western part is quite different: dusty streets and unreliable housing, no street lighting at night, rickety old cars, and so on – as in all Latin American cities. Endless queues stand permanently before any shop for any product. In the privileged neighbourhoods, queues are almost nonexistent.

Surely, the urban geography hides details that must be disclosed. The traditional middle class is in freefall, and it is definitely one of the most irritated sectors with *Chavismo*. Another question is that the old elite is now being joined by a new one, which is the offshoot of the Bolivarian process, called the “Boli-bourgeoisie”.

In such a context, it is worth asking: why do the rich in Venezuela want to topple *Chavismo*, when they have not fared all that badly in recent years? It is not easy to find an answer, especially because there are many different sectors in anti-*Chavismo*, from the impoverished middle classes to the old and the new mafias. The answer would be obvious if we were to consider the possibility that the major Western countries, with the United States up in front, may want to control the largest oil reserves in the world.

The real answer, however, which cannot be said aloud, is the one that a Caracas-based Uruguayan businessman gives: “We do not want to be governed by the blacks,” he says in a dull tone, with half a smile, like someone wanting to spit out something that is choking him. When classes overlap with the colour of the skin, racism must take a long detour circumventing the gates of political correctness. Perhaps the pride and self-confidence that the popular sectors have acquired, and has been growing since the *Caracazo* in 1989, to colour Venezuelan society with its boisterous and unkempt style, breaking the monotony of the airport lounges, is the best legacy of *Chavismo*. These are the manners that bother and irritate good families.

This article was previously published by [lalíneadefuego](#).