



# community choices

## unit three

### U3L2A3 | Bias in the media

#### overview

In this lesson you will examine the bias that is seen in the media. You will compare articles about an incident in Venezuela from four different news sources. You will then attempt to interpret the true story as while considering the bias each news source may hold.

#### learning goal

- You will gain an understanding of how our paradigms influence the media and analyze the depiction of a single event in different media for bias and slant.

#### success criteria

- You will be able to explain the relationship between the media and geopolitics.

#### Inquiry questions

- What is the media?
- Who controls the information you receive from the media?
- How do the media alter our perceptions of reality?

#### Terms to review as a class:

Paradigm  
Facts  
Opinions  
Bias  
Cognitive dissonance

#### New terms we need to know:

**Ethnocentricity** is believing that one race or cultural group is better than others.

**Propaganda** communication that has the purpose of influencing the opinions and attitudes of a group of people toward or against a cause by giving only one side of the story.

**Doublespeak** is the use of language that distorts the true meaning on purpose.

#### Perception

1. What influences how we see the world around us?
2. How do these influences differ depending on...
  - a Where you live?
  - b Your biology?
  - c Your income levels?
  - d Other issues?
3. List the top 10 things that you think influence your perception of the world around you.
4. This list will show you what is influencing your paradigm.

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### Bias in the media

- People are never entirely neutral. Everyone has a paradigm.
- Since media is created by people, it is also never entirely neutral.
- People who create the news choose what they tell, who they interview and what quotes to publish. All of this is influenced by their paradigm.
- For this reason the media story you receive is not necessarily “the truth,” but instead it is one person’s perception of the truth.
- Our news is brought to us by a surprisingly small number of organizations.
- Three major TV news services use microwave and satellite to relay their camera footage to TV networks all over the world.
  1. Viznews (British)
  2. UPIIN (British-US)
  3. CBS Newscast (owned by VIACOM)
- This means most of our international news is reported from an American or European viewpoint.
- Here is the emphasis on “international” news that we see in Canada:

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| US             | 34% |
| Europe         | 28% |
| Asia/Australia | 17% |
| Latin America  | 11% |
| Middle East    | 6%  |
| Africa         | 4%  |

### Bias in the media—Headlines

The next slide will show you three headlines from three different, but similar incidents.

- In each of these examples, why do you think the feeling of the headline and following excerpt is different?
- How do politics play a role in the coverage?
- Would you expect to see similar slants in the Canadian media?
- Why or why not?

### The global media

- The media plays a major role in developing global economic, political, social, cultural and environmental opinions.
- Access to media is also not equal. There is a disparity in access between rich vs. poor, groups in power versus those that are marginalized.
- If people are unaware of situations and the underlying causes, how can they work for change?
- It is often felt that in a democratic society, information should also be democratic and access should be protected.
  - Do you think that this is always the case?
  - What are scenarios that you can imagine that may allow information in a democratic society to be slanted or biased?
  - How much propaganda do you feel you are exposed to?

### Examining bias in the media

1. The class will now be divided into four groups. Each group is going to receive a different article.
2. On your own, read the article and summarize the information it presents.



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3. As a group develop a summary of the article.
  - What has happened?
  - Where did it happen?
  - Why is it happening?
  - Who is involved?
  - When did this happen?
  - How is it happening?
  - Did your group have an overall positive or negative impression of the government in Venezuela after reading the article? Explain your reasoning.
4. Prepare to share your article and analysis with the class.
5. Once the class has shared their articles and interpretations, discuss the following:
  - How different were your impressions after reading the four articles?
  - Why do you think this incident was depicted in such differing ways?
  - How does geopolitics play a role in bias in the media?
  - What do you think is the real story of Venezuela?

## Venezuelan Guarimbas: 11 Things the Media Didn't Tell You2

11 Feb 2015

<http://www.telesurtv.net/english/analysis/Venezuelan-Guarimbas-11-Things-the-Media-Didnt-Tell-You-20150211-0025.html>

One year ago, three people were killed in unrest in Caracas, sparking international interest in a wave of violence that had gripped Venezuela. Across the country on February 12, 2014, anti-government groups took to the streets to roll out a carefully prepared campaign for “la salida” – “the exit” from the elected government of President Nicolas Maduro. While the international media relied heavily on opposition-aligned private Venezuelan media outlets and anti-government groups for information on the rapidly changing situation, we - Ryan and Tamara - were on the ground everyday watching the unrest evolve, speaking to ordinary Venezuelans and getting the real story from the streets. While the international media described a spontaneous, peaceful protest movement that was quashed by repressive security forces, we saw something completely different. We drew conclusions based on what we could see on the ground, and burned the midnight oil researching our way through the fog of war to get to the tangible truth. Looking back on the unrest a year later, this is what “la salida” really was, what the media doesn't want you to know.

### **1. Despite constant harassment and attacks, the national guard were peaceful**

(Ryan) As the unrest heated up in February, international human rights groups decried what they claimed was mass repression against peaceful protesters. On social media, photographs were proffered as evidence of widespread abuses. Most of the photos later turned out to be lifted from protests elsewhere in the world, such as Egypt, Ukraine and Yemen. While the government has acknowledged numerous cases of misconduct by police and the national guard (GNB) and arrested those allegedly responsible, the majority of security forces that did their jobs well were largely ignored. The hundreds of GNB personnel that spent weeks guarding social missions and media outlets while enduring verbal abuse and physical attacks from guarimberos, or violent barricaders, went largely ignored. This wasn't an accident, as activist Luigino Bracci explained in February 2014. In an article published online he said he regularly saw guarimberos in Caracas using a time tested tactic of goading GNB troops for hours on end, filming their targets in a “coordinated effort.”

“If the guard makes a mistake and represses someone who is insulting him, in just minutes the video is doing the rounds of Youtube, it will be seen by millions of people and will form part of multimedia material that arrives at international chains such as CNN, NTN24 Caracol and others,” he explained.

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Yet these brief snippets aren't representative of the general conduct of the GNB. For example, in the second week of March 2014, El Nacional newspaper and opposition politicians spread a story of how the GNB supposedly repressed a peaceful protest in Lara state's National Poly-technical Experimental University. Luckily for the GNB involved, a local independent journalist filmed the entire confrontation. The [video](#) shows the GNB negotiating with guarimberos, before giving them a short workshop on human rights and releasing them.

#### 2. There was amazing, unusual police restraint

(Ryan) The video above is representative of the conduct of the majority of Venezuela's security forces during the protests, and a far cry from the narrative espoused by the private media. The guarimberos complaints of repression in reality boiled down to the government's intolerance of armed groups roaming the streets attacking pedestrians, throwing stones at cars and stringing wire across the road to decapitate motorcyclists. Cities were brought to a standstill by opposition violence, and essentially the public was held hostage by groups demanding the resignation of Maduro. Amid the chaos, I tried to imagine what would happen in my home country of Australia if someone tried to do something similar. How generously would they be treated by authorities? Today, I don't need to imagine it. In December 2014, Man Haron Monis held members of the Australian public hostage in a Sydney cafe, and tried to use them as leverage to make demands of the government. Like the guarimberos, he wasn't afraid to execute some of those he held hostage. I'm yet to hear any human rights groups decry the Australian government for refusing to surrender at Monis' feet.

#### 3. Beautiful cities were turned into rubbish dumps, and the Chavistas cleaned it up

(Tamara) Merida is giant green mountains standing right over the streets, old pastel colored houses, vibrant and often organized communities, and quiet plazas full of artisans, dogs, pigeons, old people mulling the shade, couples, skaters, and tall beard trees. During the guarimbas, the violent opposition blocked off communities and main roads, shutting down the city center, and turning Merida city into a harsh empty zone of scattered and burnt rubbish, ripped up and destroyed street fences, billboards, and burnt buses. The entrance to our dear barrio – a tiny bridge over a shallow river – was blocked with rubbish, stopping gas delivery trucks and food from getting to us:



Santa Anita - Photo: Tamara Pearson

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The private media didn't tell the world about that, nor did they describe how many nights, while the barricaders slept, communities would go out and try to clean up the mess. Gisella Rubilar was shot and killed by men in balaclavas on a motorbike, while helping to clean up. The (at the time) Chavista city council and grassroots organizations also organized a number of mass clean-ups, with the national guard tanks clearing the big obstacles, and the council providing trucks for removal of debris. Hundreds of communal council members, PSUV and PCV activists and more would join in these 5am clean-ups, sometimes singing to Ali Primera as they did, while opposition supporters watched on and booed and yelled at them.

**4. While the media claimed government crack down on free speech, the violent opposition attacked journalists**

(Tamara) On Feb. 11, the day before the violence broke out in Caracas, I walked home from work, passing one of the main blockades, on Avenue Las Americas. Opposition barricaders, with no placards, no chanting, no demands, were burning things in the intersection, pulling buses over at gunpoint and ordering people to get off and the buses turn around, and throwing rocks or pointing weapons at any motorcyclists who dared to try to get through. I stopped to take photos:

Then three of them came over and put their guns to my face and demanded my camera. "Give us your camera, or we'll kill you," they said, over and over, pushing me onto the ground, shoving me, ripping my bag. That was just one case of many. Already, a VTV office had been attacked, a Radio Mundial journalist in Merida was attacked and a photographer was shot in the leg. Later, they attacked journalists from the Merida TV collective, Tatuy, and threw their one video camera on the ground. A VTV office in San Cristobal was attacked with molotovs and shot at, a community TV in Tachira was set on fire, as was a community radio station in Arapuey, Merida state. Journalists – public, community, and private- were attacked repeatedly in Plaza Altamira, Caracas, and the VTV head offices in Caracas were basically under siege throughout February, March, and April.

**5. The psychological effects of constant fear and destruction**

(Tamara) Chavistas, non-political people, and even the peaceful opposition suffered the psychological effects of the constant violence, insecurity, and fear, but the media were more interested in the far-right, whiter, upper-class sectors, and didn't cover this. It didn't suit their message. I remember walking in the street, being scared, when people on motorbikes holding long things drove past, or there were groups of young men talking in the street – because they resembled barricaders. We were scared to take photos, to meet or march too, since snipers had killed people at a march in Bolivar – of course, we did anyway. A doctor friend would walk three hours through barricades to

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get to the hospital, and be scared every time she crossed one, because they would yell out sexual abuse, beat up people, or demand large bribes to be able to cross. Once we tried to leave our barrio late at night to work, and because we weren't participating in the caceroles – weren't banging pots, neighbors we didn't know yelled at us, "Go to hell, Chavistas, die!". Chavista effigies were hung off bridges. Another friend had a heart attack because his son had been stuck at home for weeks due to death threats. It became an act of courage to wear a red t-shirt in the street. A lot of public institutions were attacked, burnt, had windows smashed. An explosive was thrown at a Mercal food store in San Cristobal, the governors' residencies in San Cristobal and Merida were attacked, Chavista ULA students were attacked, ambulances trying to take people injured at the barricades were attacked, a man was half striped and tied to a tree and humiliated, a gas truck was burnt, as were many buses and private vehicles including food delivery trucks, various of Merida's new free tram stops were destroyed, some of the Bolivarian universities were ransacked, burnt, or wrecked, the housing ministry in Caracas was burnt, Merida's water was poisoned, a national park was set on fire, 5,000 trees were chopped down for the barricades, metro bus stations were wrecked. In Lara, they tried to burn Cuban doctors alive, and all up, there were 162 attacks registered on Cuban doctors.

In early April, before the guarimbas were over, Maduro calculated total damages at US\$15 billion. But how do you calculate the long term damage on human beings caused by constant fear and loss?



Hung Chavista effigies - Photo: teleSUR

## 6. Who was responsible for the death toll

(Ryan) Yet the opposition's violence rarely seeps into international media coverage, despite the death toll from the 2014 unrest undermining claims the guarimberos were peaceful.

In an op-ed for the New York Times in March 2014, opposition figure Leopoldo Lopez claimed, "More than 1,500 protesters have been detained, more than 30 have been killed." To its credit, the NYT

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issued a correction admitting the figure of 30 deaths “includes security forces and civilians, not only protesters,” but didn’t go into details. So what does the actual death toll look like?

Throughout the disturbances of early 2014, independent news collective Venezuelanalysis.com (VA) kept a detailed, running tally of who died, where and how. Of the 40 deaths listed by VA, deaths of those against and for the government are almost equal, though the news organization conceded a number of killings took place in unclear circumstances. Around 20 deaths were deemed to have been directly caused by opposition violence or barricades. As Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting put it, “The presence of the protest barricades appears to be the most common cause of deaths: individuals shot while attempting to clear the opposition street blockades, automobile accidents caused by the presence of the barricades, and several incidents attributed to the opposition stringing razor wire across streets near the barricades.”

### **7. What the origins of the violence were**

(Ryan and Tamara) The 2014 BBC article, ‘What lies behind the protests in Venezuela?’, nicely summed up the Western media’s understanding of what sparked the unrest when it stated, “The protests began in early February in the western states of Tachira and Merida when students demanded increased security after a female student alleged she had been the victim of an attempted rape.”

This isn’t true. The “protests” began in the first week of January 2014, when a few dozen masked individuals began barricading the main road outside the University of the Andes (ULA), and burning tires. For the first week, the masked individuals drew no police attention, and were left to block the street and harass passerbys. Buses carrying residents of the working class barrios uphill from the ULA were forced back. Without the buses, it became difficult to reach the city center from the barrios, and it was a common sight to see poor retirees slowly walking up the hill past the ULA, carrying their shopping in the tropical heat – while the “peaceful protesters” looked on. The protesters carried small arms, and weren’t afraid to draw them on anyone who complained. When the police began trying to clear the barricades, the guarimbas would hide in the university and throw rocks. Once the officers left, they would quickly rebuild. This was the prototype of the kind of urban fighting that would be employed across Venezuela a month later.

The media failed to explain this, and did not explain any of the context behind the guarimbas: upper-class and business discontent with a revolution and national government that favored (and favors) the poor, the failed opposition coup in 2002 and many opposition electoral loses, including one just months before - seeing them desperately seeking other means to gain power.



### **8. How dodgy the private media's sources were**

(Ryan) A major part of the reason why the international perception of Venezuela's opposition is so skewed is because of the voices presented in the Western media. While ordinary, working class Venezuelan voices rarely appear in the international media, right-wing fanatics are often presented as experts. Take Caracas Chronicles co-founder Francisco Toro, whose work was described by Associated Press in 2014 as "a must-read for foreign journalists, academics and political junkies." One of Toro's last regular articles for the blog he founded was penned on January 20, when he broke news of a "tropical pogrom" where protesters in middle class neighborhoods were supposedly massacred by pro-government "paramilitaries" the night earlier. The article went viral on social media, despite the fact that still today there is no evidence of any mass killings on February 19. The "tropical pogrom" never happened, but Caracas Chronicles continues to be taken as a credible source of information by the mainstream media. For example, in a January 2015 edition of Al Jazeera's TheStream, Caracas Chronicles blogger Emiliانا Duarte Otero joined a panel of academics and a student activist to discuss Venezuela's economy. She used the opportunity to warn that Venezuelans could start going hungry within months, labeled one of the other guests (George Ciccariello-Maher, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Drexel University) an "agent of communism" and claimed "every single supermarket" in Venezuela has military personnel monitoring "ration" distribution – of course, completely false.

### **9. Human rights were denied**

(Tamara) The opposition barricades meant that for months, people couldn't get to schools or hospitals. One friend couldn't get medicine to her sick, elderly mother. Other people couldn't get to the social security center for vital medicine, such as insulin shots. Schools – primary, high schools, and universities – near the main guarimbas were closed for months, denying children their human right to education. A few schools held classes in alternative venues, when they could, including a meeting room in the workers' hall. The media ignored all this.

### **10. Scarcity was exacerbated**

(Ryan) One of the main complaints from Venezuela's opposition was regarding scarcity of consumer products, yet their main "protest" strategy was to block roads. By blocking roads, the opposition inevitably impeded the transportation of consumer products. Unsurprisingly, the height of opposition unrest was accompanied by a spike in scarcity. For me personally, the logic of this was rammed home one March morning, when I passed a shuttered supermarket with a torched out semi-trailer out front. The

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burned truck was graffitied with anti-government slogans and had an opposition electoral poster slapped on the side. A few minutes further down the road, there was more anti-government graffiti complaining of scarcity. Again, the media ignored this.

**11. People still organized, despite it all, and continue to do so.**

(Tamara) Most importantly, what the media doesn't want anyone to know is that the guarimbas failed. There were weekly marches around the country demanding an end to the violence, and the Chavista's main form of resistance to it was to keep on working on their media, education, health, and community projects – projects they are still working on one year later. The alternative school I taught at still held classes, though I couldn't go because the two main entrances to the barrio were blocked by armed barricaders. Despite no public transport and all the fear, hundreds of us met in the main cultural hall to discuss a collective response to the violence.

While the media demonized the “collectives,” portraying government supporters and grassroots organizations as violent, and the opposition as peaceful, the pro-government youth organized regular cultural events in the main plaza to counter the violence. The collective patience in the face of abuse was, and continues to be extraordinary.

Elias Sanchez, PSUV youth activist told teleSUR, “We're in a permanent struggle, advancing more every day.”



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#### What lies behind the protests in Venezuela?

*Irene Caselli*

27 March 2014, BBC News Online, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-26335287>

**A wave of anti-government demonstrations - the largest in a decade - has been sweeping through Venezuela since early February. The BBC's Irene Caselli in Caracas takes a closer look at the recent unrest.**

#### What triggered the protests?

The protests began in early February in the western states of Tachira and Merida when students demanded increased security after a female student alleged she had been the victim of an attempted rape. Venezuela has the fifth highest murder rate in the world, and crime is rife in many urban centres.

The students also complained about record inflation (official figures suggest yearly inflation in December 2013 stood at 56.2%) and shortages of basic food items.

The protests in Tachira turned violent, triggering the arrest of several students, which in turn led to demonstrations in Caracas calling for their release.

The protests in Caracas started on 12 February and turned deadly when three people were shot by gunmen following a largely peaceful march that same day. There have been many demonstrations since then, varying in size from small gatherings to large rallies.

#### Who is protesting?

Students were the first to protest, but they were soon joined by hardliners from within the umbrella opposition group Table for Democratic Unity (MUD). Leopoldo Lopez, a former mayor and political maverick, and Maria Corina Machado, an MP, are the main political figures in the movement.

After the detention of hundreds of protesters and accusations that the security forces used excessive force, a more moderate wing of the opposition also took to the streets.

According to many observers and opposition leader Henrique Capriles, the protests are made up of a middle-class majority, with middle-class concerns.

#### What do the protesters want?

At first, their main demand was for increased security. But they have since broadened their demands to include the release of all those detained in previous protests, and economic changes to curb high inflation and alleviate shortages of some staples.

Many demonstrators say the government is beyond change and demand President Nicolas Maduro's resignation.



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#### **What does the government say?**

The government accuses the opposition of trying to stage a coup with backing from the United States and has arrested a number of opposition leaders on charges of inciting violence.

It has drawn parallels between the protests and a brief coup that took place against Hugo Chavez in 2002. President Maduro has called the protesters “fascists”.

#### **Who is behind the violence?**

Both protesters and members of the security forces have died in the violence which has marred some of the protests.

The opposition has accused pro-government motorcycle gangs, as well as the security forces, of shooting live rounds into opposition crowds.

The government says “fascists” are behind the violence, instigating riots and encouraging people to erect barricades. A number of motorcyclists have been decapitated by barbed wire strung across residential streets to hinder the security forces.

#### **Will the protests create change?**

These are not only the largest protests since Mr. Maduro took office, they are also Venezuela’s biggest protests in over a decade, spreading to other cities beyond Caracas.

However, so far they seem confined mainly, though not exclusively, to the middle class. The government’s popularity remains high amid its working-class voters, who gave it a further boost in local elections in December.

Mr. Capriles has said that as long as the protests do not spread to a wider sector of society, it is unlikely there will be any change.



## Venezuela: chaos and thuggery take the place of the pretty revolution

**Rory Carroll**

Sunday 23 February The Observer, Last modified on Tuesday 3 June 2014

Hugo Chávez's dream world has become a nightmare of shot-down protesters, jailed oppositionists, economic meltdown and a brutal war waged against a defiant middle class

Hugo Chávez used to call it *la revolución bonita* (the pretty revolution), but the world looked at Venezuela last week and saw only ugliness. Protesters gunned down in the streets, barricades in flames, chaos. One of the dead was a 22-year-old beauty queen shot in the head.

With the government censoring and cowering TV reports, many of the images came from smartphones, grainy and jerky snippets filled with smoke and shouts. One fact loomed through them all: Chavismo, a hybrid system of democracy and autocracy built on populism, petro-dollars and quasi-socialism, was reaping the consequences of misrule.

Demonstrations in Caracas, Valencia, Mérida and other cities turned lethal, with student-led rallies provoking a fierce backlash from National Guard units and paramilitaries. They roared on motorcycles into «enemy» neighbourhoods, guns blazing. Families piled mattresses against windows to shield against bullets.

Human Rights Watch accused security forces of excessive and unlawful force by beating detainees and shooting at unarmed crowds. Worse may come. Jailings, beatings and killings have galvanised rather than deterred the mostly middle-class protesters. They vowed to continue until *la salida*, the exit of a government that has held power under Chávez, and now President Nicolás Maduro, for 15 years. “Change depends on every one of us. Don’t give up!” Lilian Tintori, the wife of a jailed opposition leader, Leopoldo López, said via Twitter. Banners fluttered from buildings and barricades. “I declare myself in civil disobedience,” read one.

In a televised speech to red-shirted supporters, Maduro accused the US of fomenting a coup and threatened Táchira, a particularly rebellious eastern state, with martial law. A local mayor would soon join López behind bars, he vowed. “It’s a matter of time until we have him in the same cold cell.” An official policy of “communicational hegemony” harnessed state media for propaganda, intimidated privately owned broadcasters, yanked one TV channel off the air and revoked work permits for four CNN journalists.



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It may have resembled a regime's desperate battle for survival, affecting not just Venezuela but also its ally Cuba, which depends on Caracas for subsidised oil and supporters in the west who consider it a leftist beacon. In reality, though protests continue, the outcome is not in doubt. The government controls the police, army and courts and retains support among the poor. It remains an entrenched, formidable system of power untroubled by external threats. Despite the expulsion of three US diplomats – a staple of chavista political theatre – there is no evidence of a Washington plot.

The convulsions were partly confected. López, an ambitious, Harvard-educated politician, steered student protests against crime and economic problems into a wider challenge to authority. A radical minority attacked state property with stones and petrol bombs, prompting the ferocious response by security forces and militias known as *colectivos*, leaving at least six dead, scores wounded and cities echoing to the sound of enraged pot-banging, a traditional form of dissent.

"I recommend they buy some stainless steel pots to last for a good 10, 20, 30 or 40 years," Maduro mocked. "Because the revolution is here for a long time!" History suggests that the president will prevail. Street protests briefly ousted his mentor in 2002 with the aid of a military-led coup tacitly backed by Washington. Chávez bounced back. Protesters tried and failed again in 2003 by shutting down the oil industry, Venezuela's lifeblood. This time the generals and drillers appear firmly under government control. By rallying his fractious ruling coalition, Maduro could emerge even stronger.

That will not mean the revolution has won. On the contrary. In a broader, historical sense, it has already lost. This tropical would-be alternative to capitalism is a husk. It faces an existential threat not from youths chanting in plazas but from the fact that Venezuela is a shambolic, crumbling, dysfunctional ruin.

Start with the economy. The official inflation rate, 56%, is among the world's highest. There are shortages of bread, flour, meat, toilet paper and other basics. The bolívar currency has collapsed in value and is virtually unconvertible. Agriculture and industry are gasping. Newspapers are running out of paper. Airlines are threatening to cut services because the government owes them \$3.3bn. Food companies are owed \$2.4bn. Bond prices have plunged to levels associated with default. Recession hovers. An infrastructure once the envy of South America has suffered from lack of investment and maintenance. Power cuts leave cities in darkness. Potholes make highways look like they have been mortared. Cobwebs shroud abandoned cable cars. Even the facade of the presidential palace, Miraflores, peels and rots.

Crime is out of control. The government has stopped publishing regular statistics, but NGOs estimate the murder rate at 25,000 annually, one of the world's highest per capita rates, deadlier than Iraq. Kidnappings



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– people are snatched for ransom from bus stops, universities, shopping malls, airports – compound public anxiety. Corrupt police and politicised, overwhelmed courts breed impunity. An estimated 97% of murders go unpunished. The list goes on. A catalogue of neglect and decay. This does not signify collapse. Venezuela is the original El Dorado, a land that seduced conquistadores with a false promise of gold only to find itself atop the world's biggest oil reserves. Billions of petro-dollars gush into the treasury every month, a replenishing source of patronage. Yet the nation's stitches are coming loose. Venezuela is unravelling.

Even if the protests abate, Maduro faces a desolate vista that mocks chavismo's grandiose rhetoric. An anti-imperialist beacon? A new path for humanity? Not while fistfights break out in supermarkets over scarce chickens. Or a diaspora of the best and brightest scatters around the world.

Middle-class anger the government can canalise and convert into polarisation, a venerable, successful strategy. But danger lies in discontent in the barrios and pueblos, the hillside slums and dusty villages that comprise core support. It almost sank the revolution a month after Chávez's death from cancer last March when Maduro, despite lopsided advantages in money, media and institutional control, managed just a narrow, contested election victory over opposition leader Henrique Capriles. That was a sign that government patronage and handouts – jobs, subsidies, houses, electrical goods – were no longer sufficient compensation for the shortages, inflation and crime.

Chávez, first elected in 1998, created the system. A gifted politician and communicator, he expanded social programmes that sharply reduced poverty, cementing his image as champion of the underdog. But he proved to be a disastrous manager. Expropriations, subsidies and currency and price controls trapped the economy in a populist labyrinth. A historic oil boom and manic spending sustained the illusion of a new Jerusalem. You could fill an SUV tank for 60p. Chávez dreamily spoke of the population doubling, even quadrupling. He changed the clocks, the flag, the country's name, vowed to build new cities, artificial islands, a transcontinental pipeline.

There was a whiff of Ozymandias to it all, but foreign supporters applauded the fantasy. Oliver Stone, visiting Caracas to make a documentary, looked blank when I asked about the distortions and corruption haemorrhaging the economy. Shrewder observers – writers and academics – would visit and confide over rum that, yes, it all seemed a bit chaotic, then return home and publicly laud the revolution's progress.

The squandering reached such proportions that even amid record oil revenues Chávez had to borrow billions from China to confect artificial booms before elections. Maduro inherited this model – and made it

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worse. Where Chávez had the confidence to bow to economic sanity and make painful adjustments, his successor, weaker and unloved by many on his own side, has plumped for even more reckless populism, ordering supermarkets to slash prices, jailing business owners as “speculators”, sending troops to stores to liberate washing machines “for the people”.

“We are in a critical situation of shortages and that’s only the tip of the iceberg,” said Luis Vicente León, a Caracas pollster. He predicted the difficulties would soon worsen. Workers at state-owned factories in Ciudad Guayana are in near open revolt. Teachers, doctors and nurses take turns striking. Chávez’s gift for showmanship enabled him to create distractions and defuse frustration, but Maduro, stiff and wooden in comparison, relies more on thuggery. Hence the coordinated and symbolic assaults by “motorizados” on middle class neighbourhoods.

There is no more pretence that the revolution is pretty. It is in the business of keeping power, no more, no less. It offers no solution to the fiasco, the tragedy, that is Venezuela.

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<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/23/venezuela-protests-thuggery-pretty-revolution>



## **The Venezuelan Outcry – FAQs**

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### **When did these protests start?**

On February 5th, students from *Universidad de los Andes* in San Cristobal went out into the streets. Due to the heavy-handed response by the authorities, the protests quickly gained support from students elsewhere and now have spread to many other parts of civil society especially – but not only – in the middle class. Many large and several smaller cities are now seeing protests every day.

### **Why did college students start protesting?**

Venezuela has one of the world's highest levels of crime. After over a year of asking the state government for improved security measures to curb rampant crime on campus, a freshman at ULA's Táchira campus was sexually assaulted.

This attempted rape caused a wave of local protests, with students and civil society groups taking to the streets to demand justice. The government's response was heavy handed from the start: five students were detained following a protest and sent to a jail hundreds of miles away in Coro, stoking anger even further. Students in other universities joined the protests in solidarity, demanding the original five be released, only to be repressed in their turn.

As the protest movement gained steam, the protests have become as much about civil rights and the Right to Protest itself – rejecting the government's criminalization of all dissent – as about the original goals. Later still, they took on the tone of a general anti-government rebellion, with streets being blocked and running battles with security forces taking place night after night.

### **Is all this a coup?**

There is no indication that any component of the armed forces is attempting or planning a coup. Many allegations have been made but none have been backed with evidence.

### **What are the colectivos?**

The colectivos are a kind of tropical Basij. They are gangs of armed civilians broadly aligned with the government, who coordinate with the Security Forces to put down the protests. They have their roots



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in neighborhood organizations and self-help committees, and were often originally set up to keep poor neighborhoods safe from crime in the absence of an effective police, but they've increasingly come to be used as paramilitary organizations willing to do the government's dirty work. The extent to which they are really controlled by the government is a subject of much controversy – it's clear that they are sympathetic to the government, but they're not part of a unified line of command, don't follow any kind of formal rules of engagement, and have been filmed firing live rounds into protestors. What's sure is that they infuse the crisis with a dangerous new element.

#### **Why isn't the Venezuelan media covering this?**

Coverage in Venezuelan radio and TV has been very sparse, and largely pro-government. The government systematically intimidates outlets that cover stories in ways that make it look bad. While there's no explicit prior censorship, stations that "cross the line" are quickly taken off the air. Even foreign stations, like Colombia's NTN24 and CNN en Español, have been pulled from Venezuelan Cable Grids in retaliation for giving too much coverage to the protests.

As a result, Venezuelans find it easier to get information about what's going on on Twitter or on foreign media than by watching their own newscasts. This media blackout has led to waves of rumors and disinformation, adding another volatile element to the crisis.

#### **What's #LaSalida about?**

As the student movement gained altitude, opposition politicians joined the fray. Political leaders Leopoldo Lopez and Maria Corina Machado started to hold citizen assemblies to discuss what they called #LaSalida (#TheExit). The discussions were oriented to have a grassroots level debate on how to transition to a different government. The government sees #LaSalida as a clear call to a coup.

#### **Who is Leopoldo Lopez?**

Leopoldo Lopez is a charismatic young Venezuelan economist and politician trained at the Harvard-Kennedy School of Government. He is the former mayor from the Caracas municipality of Chacao. He was banned from participating in elections in 2008 due to allegations of corruption although he has never been tried for this or any other crime.

In 2011, the OAS issued an order to the Venezuelan government to drop the ban since Lopez had not been proven guilty. He founded the opposition party *Voluntad Popular* (Popular Will). He has been a major supporter of the protest movement. Maduro, on live TV said that Lopez was guilty of murder and terrorism

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and that he must be arrested. Lopez in return turned himself in. He's perceived as part of the more radical section of the opposition, which see street protests as a key pressure point to set off a transition to democracy.

### Who is Maria Corina Machado?

Maria Corina Machado is an industrial engineer graduated and longtime Civil Society activist turned politician. In 2010 she ran as an independent as was elected deputy (Congresswoman) to the Venezuelan National Assembly for a 5-year term.

She was one of the key promoters of #LaSalida. She has been under attack from chavismo on threats of removing her Parliamentary immunity. A charismatic speaker, she's also the second most prominent leader of the more radical wing of the opposition.

### Why was Leopoldo Lopez arrested?

On February 12th, Lopez and Machado summoned a protest to the *Fiscalia General* (Prosecutor General's office) to demand that the jailed student be set free. The protest turned violent when pro-government groups as well as the SEBIN started attacking the students. Three people were killed: One paramilitary (*colectivo*) leader and two students.

Ample footage and evidence shows that the student where killed by the authorities. In spite of that, Maduro accused Lopez for all this. Lopez was arrested on charges of manslaughter, terrorism and destruction of public property. The first two charges seem to have been dismissed.

### Are the protests peaceful or violent?

Both. The bulk of the protests have been peaceful. Some of the protesters have resisted the National Guard and the riot police with rocks and in occasions, with molotov cocktails. Barricades have been erected all over the country, often using burning tires.

### Is the government's response proportionate?

The government has shown increased levels of repression every day. So far, we have heard reports that they have deployed the Army (with no riot control training) in San Cristóbal and Barquisimeto. This is a dangerous new escalation.

In San Cristóbal, fighter jets have been overflying the city, presumably to intimidate the students. Overall, the government's response has been grossly disproportionate, and inflamed the situation far beyond where it needed to be.

### **Is Maduro a democrat?**

Venezuela has seen 19 elections of different kinds since 1999, and chavismo has won all but one of them. The government certainly has many supporters. Yet democracy it's not only about having elections, especially if they're neither free nor fair.

For years, elections have been held on a grotesquely uneven playing field in terms of money, media coverage, and use of state power. Opposition candidates increasingly compete amid an almost total media blackout. Serious allegations of electoral fraud from his election last April were never investigated, with the losing candidate even being fined for "offending the state" by challenging the results in court.

Maduro has copied Chavez's extremist rhetoric against his opponents and keeps calling the leaders of the MUD coalition fascists, and describes dissidents as a disease that needs to be eliminated from the body politic. On early December 2013 after local elections were held for mayors, Mr Maduro invited newly elected or reelected mayors from the opposition at Miraflores Palace to discuss proposals for addressing the country's woes.

Henrique Capriles, the most prominent moderate leader of the opposition, was summoned after a prominent young actress was murdered on early January 2014 to discuss how to tackle increasing rampant crime in the country. Some people consider these moves by Maduro a ploy to appease part of the opposition, given a worsening economic environment that could lead to social upheaval.

Yet for all the dialogue-pledges, Maduro (and chavismo as a whole) have responded in a draconian and grossly disproportionate way against protesters throughout the country. Students have been detained, tortured, wounded or even murdered by the State's security apparatus or the so-called "colectivos".

### **Was Maduro fairly elected?**

No. Maduro's party, PSUV, relies heavily on state resources to fund and execute their campaigns. From using petrodollars to state vehicles to state media.

Additionally, many irregularities were reported prior, during and after the election: coercion, threats and manipulation of the voting machines. The CNE, responsible for holding the elections, refused to hold a full audit of the system, particularly, to check for double-voters via fingerprints.

### **Who are the “Tupamaros”?**

The “Tupamaros” are the original “*colectivo*”. Founded in 1992, with paramilitary underpinnings and pro-chavismo links. They refuse to renounce the use of violence or arms in order to protect communities they fathom “too dangerous even for the police force” according to wikipedia. Some opposition protesters have claimed that the “Tupamaros” have been undertaking the repression against them.

### **Is the opposition divided?**

The opposition is a very diverse coalition from left leaning to conservatives which has only one common attribute: ridding Venezuela of chavismo. Views on how to achieve that diverge. In most major elections the opposition has presented a unique candidate for the contesting districts.

Given the current political crisis in Venezuela, the opposition appears divided. Some members of the opposition wish to defy the government under the criteria based on the Constitution for a regime-change (resignation of the president, recall referendum or presidential elections at the end of the 6-year term); while others refuse to wait until 2019 in order to change the government. New actors, in particular the Student Movement leaders, do not always coordinate effectively with the established political parties.

### **Is the US behind all of this?**

Following a very old Cuban media-management technique, the Venezuelan regime continues to blame the US and the CIA for all problems occurring in Venezuela. Preposterous conspiracy theories abound. No evidence has ever been provided of such allegations.

The US remains Venezuela’s biggest trade partner.

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