Foreign Interference in Venezuela: The Ethics and Practicality

BY MAO SHIOTSU

“A minimum wage won’t give you enough to buy a kilogram of meat, let alone medicine,” says Paola Zerpa, a Venezuelan national studying engineering at the University of Texas. Human Rights Watch reports that hyperinflation has left around 80 percent of the population food insecure. But rising up against the inept Maduro regime is dangerous—the colectivos, an armed government force, harshly crack down on protests. Since 2014, over three million Venezuelans have fled this reality—almost ten percent of the country’s population.

To make matters worse, it’s not clear who the president is. Is it Nicolás Maduro, Hugo Chávez’s socialist successor, or Juan Guaidó, the relatively new face from the progressive Voluntad Popular party? Government opposition parties boycotted the May 2018 Venezuelan presidential election, accusing Maduro of bringing the election forward to his advantage and persecuting political opponents. With only about 30 percent of eligible voters having voted, as reported by BBC, Maduro won a second term of presidency. The opposition rejected this outcome. In January of last year, Guaidó, speaker of the National Assembly, claimed himself the rightful interim president of Venezuela. There have seemingly been two presidents ever since.

“Guaidó was a symbol of hope (for many of the Venezuelan public) when he was declared interim...
Por eso estoy aquí

In Spain, as Venezuela’s conqueror, has some responsibility to push responsibility only on the Spanish “without acknowledging the crucial participation” of other states. One group believes that a democratic and stable Venezuela becomes an oil-producing country—“seen a little simplistic and shortsighted.” Indeed, claiming that all colonial powers are responsible for the state of their previous colonies does seem overly simplistic. After all, the current condition of any country can be traced back to a part of its history.

Then perhaps foreign countries have a different moral responsibility to provide aid: goodwill. But the other side of this coin becomes obvious when considering why the US is so keen on asserting its support for the liberal Guaidó’s imperial interests. The superpower’s interference in overthrowing governments in Latin American states lies in their colonial history. Spanish conquistadors followed a specific method of colonization: capture the indigenous leader, install a Spaniard in their place, then extract wealth and labor from indigenous populations. This is the gist of the economic system. There were other similar systems in Latin America, such as the mita and repartimiento. For around three centuries, the Spanish gained wealth through these structures at the expense of the native population.

Origin of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue that the reason for the current political and social turmoil in many Latin American states lies in their colonial history. Spanish conquistadors followed a specific method of colonization: capture the indigenous leader, install a Spaniard in their place, then extract wealth and labor from indigenous populations. This is the gist of the economic system. There were other similar systems in Latin America, such as the mita and repartimiento. For around three centuries, the Spanish gained wealth through these structures at the expense of the native population.

That’s why I’m here today. So that none of you leave Venezuela out.”

But Dr. Cristina Soriano, Associate Professor of History at Villanova University whose research focuses on revolutions and society in colonial Venezuela and Latin America, warns that we cannot be too quick to point fingers. Dr. Soriano cautions that to push responsibility only on the Spanish “without acknowledging the crucial participation” of other imperial actors during the 20th century—when Venezuela became an oil-producing country—“seems a little simplistic and shortsighted.” Indeed, claiming that all colonial powers are responsible for the state of their previous colonies does seem overly simplistic. After all, the current condition of any country can be traced back to a part of its history.

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Juan Guaidó at the World Economic Forum, January 2020

The international community must also recognize the Venezuelan population’s opinions on foreign interference. Professor Sebastian Diaz, Venezuelan professor of Spanish at Yale, comments that the Venezuelan population’s views split largely into two. One group believes that a democratic and peaceful election is the best way to strip Maduro of power, and therefore does not want international help, fearing that it will bring unnecessary bloodshed. The other group regards democratic elections as unrealistic, and that the only way to throw the dictatorship is through violence backed by foreign countries. Paul calls that it will require sanctions against Venezuela’s people and military unifying to drive out those currently in power and have democratic elections.”

Thus, the general consensus is that for Venezuela to recover from the crisis and for the Venezuelan public to feel safe in their own country, Maduro’s dictatorship needs to end. The most bloodless avenue seems to be a peaceful handover of power through democratic elections. The belief that this is unrealistic is reasonable judging from past Venezuelan elections, for example in May 2018 when opposition parties boycotted the election. But as Dr. Velasco asserts, it’s not about whether “it’s realistic,” but “whether it’s necessary.”

Many of the past US military intrusion in Latin American politics have failed spectacularly in creating long-term stable democracies. Thus, military intervention is out of the question considering Venezuela’s best interests. What’s necessary seems to be for the Venezuelan population to collectively elect a new president, and for Maduro to peacefully hand over power to the newly elected government. Perhaps this is where the international community can step in. They could apply smart pressure to ensure that Maduro, should be lose the election, steps down without creating trouble. This should be done not through arbitrary sanctions and promises of help that stem from imperial incentives, but through policies targeted towards securing Venezuela’s long-term stability, such as multilateral election monitoring. But what if Maduro wins the election? This outcome is plausible due to the spiraling economic crisis. To ensure the stability of the economy, he has announced the reintroduction of liberalizing policies, such as securing private property. Perhaps there will stabilize Venezuela’s economy and allow Maduro to continue to hold on to power. In that case, as long as the elections were held democratically, foreign powers must not interfere. Otherwise, Venezuela will become yet another battling ground for the world’s imperial actors.