



Embassy Magazine

Canada Must Call for Dialogue Amid Unrest in Venezuela

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By Barbara Wood, Tara Ward and Stacey Gomez

As a coalition of Canadian civil society organizations engaged with development and social justice issues in the Americas, we express our deep concern over the disruption of democratic order in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, over the past two months, and the lack of clarity of Canada's position on this crisis.

We are concerned that the February 28 House of Commons resolution on unrest in Venezuela appears to hold the Venezuelan government solely responsible for the political violence and fails to address the fact that both government supporters and state security forces, as well as the opposition, have equally suffered fatalities, wounded and detained.

Those responsible for a large part of the violence are the opposition leaders, Leopoldo Lopez and Maria Corina Machado, who have been instigating the violent demonstrations with the clear aim of destabilising the democratically elected government. In the face of polarization and deep tensions in Venezuela, they have called for street protests which have provided cover for a small group of violent protestors to take to the streets, attacking – with rocks and Molotov cocktails – public institutions like the police headquarters and the Attorney General's office. Both López and Machado have refused to enter into any dialogue to peacefully resolve the conflict as called for by President Maduro.

On March 7, Canada found itself virtually isolated in the community of the Americas, as one of only three members of the Organization of American States (OAS) to vote against a resolution to support talks between the government of Venezuela and opposition forces (29 countries voted to support a peace dialogue). Whereas political forces in the United States are moving towards implementing economic sanctions against the Venezuelan Government, the governments of South America have taken a more balanced and respectful approach, forming a commission to attempt to mediate between the government and the opposition.

Your Ministry has recently declared its clear opposition to *external interference* in the sovereign affairs of the Ukraine and should do the same in the case of Venezuela. There is long-standing evidence of the United States government's engagement in efforts to disrupt the democratically-elected governments of Presidents Chávez and Maduro. Some examples of this are the US role in supporting those who participated in the 2002 coup that briefly overthrew President Chávez, significant funding and other assistance to opposition organizations such as Sumate, by USAID and the National



Endowment for Democracy, as well as funding and training in the US for students active in opposing the Venezuelan government.

Canadian action regarding Venezuela suggests that it is time to clarify Canada's interests and objectives vis-à-vis the Bolivarian Republic.

The government of Canada should make clear its support for constitutional government, electoral democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela. Given the electoral mandates won by President Maduro in the April, 2013 Presidential elections and recently in the December municipal elections, where over 75% of the mayoralties across the country were won by the pro-government candidates, with a voter turnout of 58%, the legitimacy of the current government is clear.

A number of reports in the Canadian media on the appointment of Mr. Ben Rowsell as Canada's new ambassador to Venezuela speculate that this specialist in the political use of social media was appointed to the post to facilitate Canadian communications with social forces that aim to overturn the Venezuelan government.

US National Security Agency (NSA) documents leaked last year by Edward Snowden indicate Venezuela is one of six "enduring targets" for U.S. signals intelligence. Given the Communications Security Establishment Canada's (CSEC) association with the NSA in the "Five Eyes" alliance many are concerned CSEC will be cooperating with other intelligence agencies to target Venezuela.

The current conflict in Venezuela serves as a bellwether for the region and other countries of Latin America who will take Canada's position on Venezuela as an indicator of its policy towards the region. It is important to avoid further incidents, such as the March 7 vote at the OAS where Canada is seen to work with the United States in opposition to the combined desire of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean working for a peaceful resolution to the current conflict in Venezuela.

Canada needs to stand with the rest of the Americas in supporting the proposal by President Maduro for face to face dialogue aimed at seeking common solutions to the problems Venezuela faces.

We call upon the Canadian government to condemn foreign intervention in Venezuela's internal affairs via the funding and training of groups and individuals seeking regime change through violence or other unconstitutional means, and to support dialogue as the only appropriate means of achieving peace and reconciliation in Venezuela.

Sincerely,
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Barbara Wood and **Tara Ward** are co-chairs of the Americas Policy Group and **Stacey Gomez** is the group's co-ordinator. It is a Canadian-based coalition of about 40 international development and humanitarian non-governmental organizations, human rights groups, labour unions, research institutions, and church and solidarity groups. It's a working group of the Canadian Council for International Co-operation.

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