

66 Venezuelan Civil Society Organizations urge their peers in the region to defend the validity of democracy and human rights in Venezuela

The Venezuelan civil society organizations that endorse this document urge our peers in Latin America and the Caribbean to raise their voices in defense of democracy and human rights in our country. The rupture of the constitutional order, through rulings handed down at the end of March by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, as well as the repression of peaceful demonstrations and President Nicolás Maduro's decision to impose the fraudulent call of a Constituent Assembly, violating constitutional guarantees and fundamentally damaging democratic principles, involve serious regressions in the field of human rights and undermine the peace of the Republic.

All the demands presented by a wide sector of the Venezuelan civil society to the government of President Nicolás Maduro are in line with the current Constitution. The demands in question are focused on five points: 1) Publication of an electoral timetable and activate the legal mechanisms that would allow early presidential elections; 2) release of political prisoners and end of political disqualifications; 3) respect for the Constitution and the Venezuelan parliament; 4) provision of humanitarian aid to mitigate the shortage of food and medicines that Venezuelans suffer today; And (5) disarm paramilitary gangs acting under government orders.

The international community promotes the beginning of a negotiation process to overcome the crisis that Venezuela is suffering today. The autonomous organizations of Venezuelan civil society firmly believe in dialogue, but consider it necessary to set deadlines, agenda and clear rules so that this effort yields fruit and does not lead to a new frustration that add fuel to the fire of violence.

In Venezuela, attempts at dialogue are not new. On the contrary, at least three dialogue processes have taken place, all with the same result: a failure that has only served to increase political tension and has prevented progress in solving serious problems that affect the majority of the Venezuelan population, such as the increase of poverty and the cost of living, hunger and the shortage of medicines and other basic products. Hereafter, these experiences will be mentioned to alert regional civil society organizations in order to avoid making the same mistakes of the past.

- Between 2002 and 2003, the so-called "Negotiating and Agreements Table" took place, with the facilitation of the then Secretary-General of the Organization of American States (OAS), César Gaviria, the Carter Center and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Except for the point referred to the recall referendum, which finally took place on 15 August 2004 and was won by the late President Hugo Chavez, none of the pacts signed at that table were respected. These included: 1) Designation of a reliable electoral arbiter; (2) the creation of a "Truth Commission" on the events of April 2002; 3) the implementation of a "vigorous campaign for the effective disarmament of the civilian population"; (4) to prevent security forces from being used as "an instrument of arbitrary

or disproportionate repression, as well as for actions involving political intolerance"; 5) to leave the conduction of the police forces in the hands of civil authorities; 6) consolidation of political pluralism; and 7) fairness and impartiality in the public media.

If these points had been met, today Venezuela would not be plunged in this political, social and economic crisis that merits the urgent help of the entire region. In fact, 14 years later, Venezuelan civil society continues to claim those same demands, as well as responses to the population's social demands.

- Another dialogue process between the government and the political opposition was conducted between April and May 2014, with the facilitation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) represented by the governments of Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, and the apostolic nuncio accredited in Caracas. The government's refusal to make progress on issues such as the release of political prisoners, the installation of a "truth commission" to investigate the events that took place in the context of the protests of that year, and the renewal of public powers according to the criteria of balance and impartiality, led the opposition to abandon the dialogue in protest.

- Government and opposition formally began another dialogue process on 24 October 2016, with UNASUR's facilitation - represented then by its Secretary-General, Ernesto Samper - former presidents José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (Spain), Leonel Fernández (Dominican Republic) and Martín Torrijos (Panama), and the Vatican. Again, the government's refusal to honor its commitments denied the possibility of finding a peaceful solution to the Venezuelan crisis. In a letter sent on 1 December 2016 to representatives of the Venezuelan political opposition, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin expressed his "pain and concern" over the "disturbing delay" in adopting the "necessary measures for the concrete application of the agreements". All these measures depended on the Executive to: 1) Face the shortage of food and medicines; 2) the publication of the electoral timetable; 3) respect for the National Assembly; And 4) "accelerate the detainees releasing process," qualified as political prisoners by the Venezuelan opposition. The government of President Maduro responded to this letter with attacks and insults towards the Holy See and Cardinal Parolin, the former apostolic nuncio accredited in Caracas.

Taking into account these serious precedents and the spiral of violence that has been unleashed in the country, the Venezuelan civil society organizations that endorse this document urge our peers from the continent to advocate for serious negotiations with deadlines, agenda and guarantees, which serves to build a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis, within the framework of the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999. Facilitating that the government use the dialogue in a misleading way as a strategy to gain time and legitimacy means to remove the possibilities of solution to the crisis and to continue to lose lives and suffer irreparable damage in a confrontation provoked by the leadership in power, which also undermines the region's stability.

Violating the principles of universal, direct and secret vote, and without consulting the Venezuelan people in a referendum, as head of sovereignty, President Maduro intends to modify the Constitution to guarantee his hold on power and put an end to the republic and the "democratic and social state of law and justice" enshrined in it. Several government spokespersons have indicated that the Constituent Assembly will be installed to "sweep away" the opposition, "eliminate" the parliament and "impose peace", a peace imposed through state violence. "Constituent or war," said President Maduro, ignoring the sovereignty of the Venezuelan people and denying citizens the right to freely decide on the constitutional options that would overcome the crisis without plunging Venezuela into violence.

Given the threat of the republic dissolution, the people of Venezuela need the solidarity of civil society organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean, which must act today in defense of democracy, human rights and peace in Venezuela.

The ministers of foreign affairs of all our countries will meet in the next few days in the OAS framework, to continue discussing the Venezuelan crisis and actions that allow an early solution, by peaceful and democratic means. We count on the governments of the region, in all their spaces of political and diplomatic action, to take into account the tragedy of the Venezuelan people, accompanying it without delay in its struggles to restore democratic freedoms and the full observance of human rights in Venezuela.

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