

News

AP Analysis: In Venezuela, Short on Food, Short of Hope

Young people have fled country, and many citizens have stopped protesting as conditions worsen

By HANNAH DREIER and JOSHUA GOODMAN, Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuela is so short on food that tens of thousands are going hungry or even starving. Its murder rate is among the highest in the world. Its economy is so crippled that the average shopper spends 35 hours a month waiting in line — three times more than in 2014.

Yet even as the country becomes increasingly unlivable, the socialist government is more entrenched than it has been in years. A sense of hopelessness has settled over what was once among

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the richest nations in South America, a belief that nothing will really change.

To understand why people have given up, look at Jhorman Valero and his family.

Three years ago, Valero dragged his 24-year-old cousin, Bassil da Costa, to join thousands of others in a nationwide protest against the administration of President Nicolas Maduro. Hours later, Bassil was bleeding in his arms, the first of more than 40 people to be killed during weeks of unrest. Staring numbly at the floor, Jhorman recounts how he watched his cousin’s skull come apart under his baseball cap from a bullet shot by security forces.

Now Valero and Bassil’s sister, Yenicer da Costa, no longer bother to protest, even on the anniversary of the 2014 protest.

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The fear inspired by the 2014 crackdown weighs heavily on the present, with a government that is selectively repressive. Many of more than 100 political prisoners were arrested that year and remain in jail, according to human rights groups. Most are being held incommunicado in the dungeons of El Helicoide, a spiral-shaped modernist landmark built as a shopping mall during the 1950s oil boom, which is now the headquarters of the all-powerful Sebin intelligence police.

The creation last month of an “anti-coup commando unit” headed by the

vice president has stoked fears of more roundups. The unit already has arrested three members of the party of Leopoldo Lopez, the highest-profile prisoner, who led the protest at which Bassil was killed.

As the price of oil has fallen and laid bare years of mismanagement, Maduro’s administration has responded by becoming more repressive. It has purged state institutions of potential traitors, kept out foreign reporters, detained prominent businessmen and declared null all decisions by the opposition-controlled congress.

As a result, the young people who would be the natural fuel for any street protest movement are not turning out. At demonstrations these days, there are more grandparents than youths.

One reason is that so many young people have simply fled the country.

The protest this month got off to an inauspicious start, with an older man shouting, “Where are all the students?” “They didn’t come!” called back Diego



In this Feb. 12, 2017 photo, students hold an anti-government protest to mark the third anniversary since the killing of student protester Bassil da Costa by security forces during weeks of unrest in Caracas, Venezuela. Bassil’s sister, Yenicer da Costa, no longer bothers to protest, even on the anniversary of her brother’s death. “What’s the point of protesting if they just kill you in the streets and three years later, everything is even worse?” she said.

Cerboni, student union president at the private Santa Maria University.

Many of the friends Cerboni used to rely upon to demonstrate have left Venezuela. Cerboni estimates 100 students are leaving Santa Maria each week, forcing professors to consolidate sections and cancel under-enrolled classes at the 12,000-student campus.

One recent survey found 88 percent of young Venezuelans want to emigrate. Venezuelans accounted for more U.S. asylum requests than any other country last year — more than 18,000, compared to a few hundred in 2013. So many people are applying for passports that the government has run short of supplies and all but stopped issuing them.

“The government has a smart strategy. They keep us looking over our shoulder, keep us busy looking for food and medicine. You’re working on how to get out of the country, and you don’t have time to march,” Cerboni said.

Protester Marcello Gonzalez, 69, said all his 15 grandkids and seven of his 10 children have left the country.

“There’s a terror campaign here,” he said. “The government is using tear gas and arrests to intimidate the young people and make them stay home. We older people don’t have to worry as

much. We know we’re not the target.”

To be sure, the streets are not always calm. Twice last year, the opposition rallied hundreds of thousands of people to protest the Maduro administration. But while popular movements have helped topple governments in places like Egypt and Ukraine, Venezuela’s protests seem to have had little effect on the political calculus of those in power.

“Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a lot of people are walking around with this myth in our heads that if you get enough people into the streets, the government will fall. And that’s just not true,” said Steven Levitsky, a professor at Harvard University who specializes in Latin American politics.

The loss of hope is also tied to the opposition’s failure to present a clear alternative to the government. It is perennially divided and absorbed by its own internal ego battles.

The government has successfully made use of legal loopholes to hobble the opposition without much international protest. For much of last spring and summer, the opposition appeared to be getting back on track, collecting some 2 million signatures — 10 times the required minimum — to force a recall referendum against Maduro.

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