

‘He declared that he had not resigned the Presidency?’

Facing down the Coup

Hugo Chávez is interviewed by Marta Harnecker

This article is excerpted from Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution: Hugo Chávez talks to Marta Harnecker (Monthly Review Press \$15.95). The book covers a wide range of topics, including President Chávez’s political formation, the transformation currently taking place in Venezuela, and its place in the global context. In what follows, Chávez recounts the events of the failed coup d’état against him of 11 April 2002. Marta Harnecker is director of Centro de Investigaciones Memoria Popular Latinoamericana (MEPLA) in Havana, Cuba, an organisation for research on the history of popular movements in Latin America. Her questions and comments are printed in italics, and President Chavez’s replies are in ordinary type.

Since we are doing this interview in the same place that you were detained during the April 11 coup, could you tell me your strongest memories of those bitter hours?

We initially thought we would have several alternatives, including moving to Maracay, but the tanks I had sent for earlier, needed to make that move ... had been sent to Fort Tiuna instead [under pressure from the generals supporting the coup]. That made our move to Maracay impossible. After consulting with some of my people, I finally decided to accept [the pro-coup generals’] demand to hand myself in.

I gave Giordani and Navarro hugs and I said goodbye to my dispatch, saying, ‘The strategic window has closed.’ They did not respond. I thought I was going to die. That ominous feeling crossed my mind for a few moments. I said goodbye to everyone who was with me there in the palace.

I went to Fort Tiuna with Generals [Manuel Antonio] Rosendo, [Ismael] Hurtado, and a few others that I chose. I did not go as a prisoner. It was only when I entered the building under the command of the general of the army that I became a prisoner of the coup-mongering generals.

When I was in Fort Tiuna, and I saw on a television that an official there had lent me that they announced my resignation, and I figured out their plot, their lie. Then I thought, they are going to kill me; it’s the only way to prevent me from telling the truth. In that moment, an official lent me a telephone and I called my wife and said to her, ‘get going, they are about to kill me.’ I tried calling my daughters and I got one of them, my daughter María, and I told her, ‘María, get going and spread the word because they are going to kill me.’

I also thought they were going to kill you. I still don’t understand why they didn’t.

They gave the order to kill me, but what

happened was the mutinous generals did not have a true leader and some of them, especially the younger officers who were in charge of me, blocked that order.

There was even a waiter, one of those guys who serve coffee, who overheard two officers talking. Apparently he heard Admiral Molina who it seems was pressuring [Pedro] Carmona to order my physical elimination. This young waiter tells me he overheard perfectly when Carmona said, 'OK, it's all right, rub him out.' And really, that night they took me up to Turiamo in a helicopter – an inhospitable site, given the circumstances, the tensions in that environment – I said to myself, 'The moment has come,' and I began to recite my prayers with my crucifix. I was ready to die standing, with my dignity. I told myself, 'Your hour has come, but you will die for being loyal to your people.'

All the lower-ranking people who were around me at each of the various places they had me detained – soldiers and officers alike – went way out of their way to help me out, to clean the room, the modest bathroom. There was a really small bed and they found a better one, and brought a chair. They would offer me sodas, or coffee. They really went out of their way.

When they let me out to take a quick jog, they brought me a T-shirt and they got me some sandals to wear outside. They were ready to help me with whatever little thing I might need.

There were also the two female military prosecutors. These women came into my room by themselves at first, but right after they arrived, they were ordered out and a few minutes later they came back with a colonel from the coup who was a lawyer, and they sat down. So I figured out they had ordered the women out because that officer wanted to be there.

We talked for a few minutes and they asked me how I felt. I told them the first thing I wanted them to know was that I had not renounced or even thought about stepping down. I called out the lie that was being propagated through the media.

The women wrote by hand on a small page a few notes about my health, and I signed it. I saw that they had not written down what I said about not having resigned, but I knew they were under a lot of pressure, and I didn't want to make it worse for them, so I just said, 'Well, thanks.'

Their look showed me sympathy and they left. You know what they did? After they signed and the colonel looked it over, one of them wrote at the bottom in small letters, 'He declared that he has not resigned the presidency.' Then they sent a copy of it by fax to the Attorney General and that is why Isaiás Rodríguez, the DA, in that interview that came out in the afternoon said, 'We have received information from the military attorney that the president has not resigned.'

Then there is the help I received from the soldier who gave me a rock to pray with. This man was a patriot, in his own way. And the lieutenant who came to Turiamo and told me: 'Don't worry, you are our president, don't worry because later tonight we are going to capture the higher officials and get you out of here.' There was another guy who showed up once in a while where they had me detained and took notes I wrote out in the garbage, gave them to his wife who made lots of copies, and distributed them showing people that I had not resigned.

All those were a help, one drop after the other. I will never forget those guys, those days.

Being here on Orchid Island today makes me remember two things: one good and one bad. The good memory is I was here during *Semana Santa* [Holy Week] swimming with my daughter Rosa Inés, with María Isabel [then Chávez's wife], and the boy Raúl. I escaped and we had a really nice time. The bad one is that night when I was held prisoner here.

Once night fell, I started to realise that something was happening in the country, something in support of the revolution. I noticed it in the attitude of the soldiers that were watching me. They had undergone a change; I started to feel it in the environment. An admiral came to the island in a helicopter and entered the room I was in – he took off his shoes, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, and ate fish after having taken a run with the men on the island – he stands up straight and says to me, ‘Mr. President, I come here on a special mission.’ That was another sign, because that was the first time since I had been taken prisoner that they had called me ‘president.’ Then the coup conspirators sent me a special group of emissaries: a general from Military Justice, a colonel from the coup conspirators, and the archbishop. I was in the little room and was already processing scenarios in my mind about what this group would want with me. I wanted to play for time more than anything else, to try to figure out what was happening in the country. I had allowed them to take me to the island because I know the island – I knew that, in spite of the fact that it was an island, I would have opportunities to get access to information. I even thought if the situation wasn't changing, they were coming to offer me safe passage out of the country and that maybe I should accept, without resigning, the idea of going to a friendly country and then organising an international action. I wanted to speak with the archbishop first and I told him they made me come here and we talked a few things over. More than anything, I was asking him how it was possible that the Catholic Church had allowed a coup that went against the laws of God. We spoke for a little while. Then we went out to the meeting with the others. They had come to bring me the resignation papers to sign, and they told me there was a plane waiting to take me out of the country as soon as I signed it. Two nights earlier they had said that it did not matter if I signed, that it was the same anyway. When I saw this I said to myself, ‘They are in trouble. Something serious is happening if they are coming here and putting a plane at my command.’

I told them I could not sign it, that they knew I had been willing to sign under a series of conditions, and I repeated the conditions that I had put forward at the palace. I knew they couldn't give them to me. I told them that the first one was the physical safety of all the people in the country and the government: ‘You have violated that condition, you have detained people, beat them up, who knows all that is happening now,’ but while I was at Fort Tiuna, I saw that they had taken Tarek [Tarek Williams, now governor of Anzoategui State] prisoner, and also another representative, they had been dragged out of their houses, arrested. ‘Second: that they respect the constitution, that is, if I resign, it must be before the National Assembly, and the vice president assumes the presidency, until they can call new elections. And you guys

cancelled the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, and so forth. So what are we really talking about here?’

And you knew about all that?

I knew because in Fort Tiuna, as I told you, an official lent me a TV, so all day while I was there, I watched the news, until 6 pm. Then, when they took me to another location that night, I didn’t learn anything else. I had seen that they had taken several people prisoner: the minister of the interior, the governor of Táchira; I saw the self-swearing in by Carmona, and his decrees. [He is referring to the decrees with which Carmona appointed himself president and dissolved the branches of government: the Supreme Court, Attorney General, People’s Defender, National Comptroller, National Electoral Council, and the existing Executive branch.]

The third condition was to be able to speak live to the country. ‘Do you guys really think I am going to leave like that? Without saying anything to the country?’

And fourth: that all my government aides be allowed to come with me, those folks who were with me for years. They were not going to accept that either because that was my support in the whole process.

And the archbishop said: ‘OK, Chávez, you have to think about the country,’ you know, with that rhetoric ... ‘I am thinking about the country.’ We started to argue, and I was buying time the whole while. I saw the sergeants who were there with their rifles and light missiles, talking to each other and looking at me as well; there was a kind of tension in the air. And outside, the admiral who had brought me here was making calls, going in and out. I could tell something was happening, something bigger than the lie about the resignation.

So I focused on buying time, on talking and debating. That is when I put forward a second scenario, I told them, ‘Look, I am not going to sign the resignation. You guys have violated the constitution,’ and I showed them my pocket-sized edition. ‘The absolute absence of the president is what you guys want? The only way to that kind of absence is death. Is that what you want? The resignation depends on me, the death is up to you guys. Or you want a medical team to declare me incapable of command and that finding to be upheld by the Supreme Court and the National Assembly? We no longer have either of those bodies, I wonder if you can find some doctors to do that for you anyway? That really isn’t a viable option for you anyway, is it? So you are left with only one option, which I will tell you to make it easier, a constitutional alternative: separation of responsibility.’ Then I set an interpretive trap: I knew that they did not know much about the law, but there was a colonel there who was a lawyer and a good one. So I said to myself, ‘He is a lawyer and I am not, but he is not familiar with the constitution and I am.’

Then I told him, ‘I can abandon my office, here is the constitution, shall we read it? “Absolute absence of the president, this, that and the other, and abandonment of office.”’ But the constitution says the National Assembly has to

recognise the abandonment of office, and I did not read them that part. Then I said, 'I am willing to sign a document that says I abandoned office, but not that I resigned.' 'But what is the difference?' The colonel asked and then went out to talk on the telephone and came back with a borrowed copy of the constitution and then he realised what I was doing. 'But Chávez, the thing is that there is a problem: the National Assembly.' 'That is your problem, but it is the only way that I can sign that declaration, and you also have to let me use the phone, because if I am going to go to Mexico or to Cuba, I need to speak with the presidents of those countries. I am not going to leave here in a plane with no direction, and besides, I need to talk to my wife and kids, and settle a few other small things.'

So then I started to draft a document that said, 'I, Hugo Chávez Frias, with such and such national ID number ...' Of course, I wrote it in accordance with my plan: 'Before the preponderance of the facts, I accept that I have been removed from office, and therefore I have abandoned it,' something like that. And this guy took the bait and said to me, 'Alright, I have to take them something signed.'

So then they began to type up the document. The official who was writing was one of the ones I had been winning over – I had been talking with them one on one, most of them were decent guys – so he was typing slowly. He made a mistake and had to start over, I was still playing for time. The colonel told him to hurry up. Again, I noticed that the colonel was nervous. The area was filled with soldiers and I could see that some of them were taking up defensive positions, on alert for combat. So, I called the admiral who was outside and I said to him, 'What is the big threat here? Why are these guys taking out their rocket launchers and taking up defensive positions?' The guy nervously responds: 'No, no, Mr. President, it is nothing, you know we have to protect your life.'

I stayed in the room alone and the chief of my guard came up to me and whispered: 'Mr. President, I did not sign anything,' and then he disappeared. I stayed there wondering what was going on. I went to the bathroom to buy a bit more time and to come up with a strategy. Then I decided not to sign. I came out and I said: 'Look, Lieutenant, don't keep writing that,' and I said to the archbishop and the others, 'I am definitely not going to sign anything, but thanks for your visit,' and then I joked with them. 'If you would like to stay here for the night in my luxurious jail, then you can leave in the morning. I have thought about it, and I am definitely not going to leave, my family is here, my kids, my party, and my people ... I don't know what is happening because you guys have not given me information or even a phone to call someone, you have kept me incommunicado.'

It was really strange to me that they did not even try to resist what I told them, but instead quickly agreed: 'OK Chávez, you are right, we are leaving,' and they quickly left. They were more nervous still when they came back five minutes later. The priest was the colour of that white chair over there. The admiral comes up and says: 'Mr. President, there is a situation here, a unit of paratroopers is on the way, they are about to arrive.' He didn't know that a marine frigate and some swift boats were also coming. So I asked him why they were coming. 'They are coming to rescue you.' 'And you, what are you thinking about doing about it?' 'No,

nothing, we are here to guard your life, nothing is going to happen, I spoke with General Baduel, of the paratrooper unit and I told him to radio to his helicopters and tell them that there is no resistance here, we are not going to fire a single shot.’ That sounded more like it, and I asked him, ‘And all of you guys, why did you stay?’ ‘Because the plane that brought us has left already.’ I imagined that the plane heard over the radio that the attack helicopters were coming and decided to hightail it out of there. I was laughing at this point, but I offered to take them off the island in my helicopter. The admiral came up to me again and told me I had a telephone call from the minister of defence. ‘I don’t want to speak with that admiral – the one the coup conspirators had named minister of defence.’ ‘No, no, it is your minister of defence, Doctor Rangel.’ That got me very excited and I went to the phone. Just hearing the voice of José Vicente Rangel was like having the sun come out in the middle of the night. His voice was on fire. ‘Well, we are waiting for you. I will explain when you get here.’ ‘But where are you?’ I asked. ‘Here in the Ministry of Defence, we have retaken the palace, and Carmona has been detained. The paratroopers are on their way to get you, they should arrive any minute and we are here waiting for your arrival, the people are waiting in the streets.’ ‘Have there been people killed?’ ‘Well, a few, but we will explain everything when you get here.’ ‘And who are you with over there?’ ‘With General López Hidalgo.’ ‘Let me have a word with him.’ And I spoke with him briefly: ‘Look, compadre, what’s going on? Have many people been killed?’ ‘No, Mr. President, don’t worry, a few people were killed, but the people are in the streets and we control the army and the rest of the state power.’ ‘OK, I will see you soon.’

Then I called the general in charge of the paratroopers in Maracay, which had been the bastion of resistance. I spoke with Baduel, and with Garcia Montoya who were there at the command centre. They explained a few things, but there was no time because the helicopters were already landing. There was no problem, and a few lawyers and doctors came to check up on me because there had been rumours that I had been beaten while in custody, and people had been worried about that.

Well, I think it was at about this time of the morning when they showed up [he looks at his watch and it is around 2:30 am] because I got to the palace around 4 am. So that is why I told you I would remember this place for the rest of my life.

When I reflect on the April 11 coup, I remember the citation I mentioned earlier from John Kennedy: ‘Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.’ We chose to make our revolution constitutionally, through a constitutional process of unquestionable legitimacy. If at some point on April 11 or 12 I doubted that a democratic and peaceful revolution was possible, what happened on April 13 and 14 – when an immense number of people came out into the streets, surrounding Miraflores and several army barracks, to demand my return – strongly reaffirmed my belief in that kind of revolution. Of course the battles are long and hard – we are talking about the art of making possible what appeared to many to be impossible.