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Mr. Maduro in His Labyrinth

By Editorial Board

Framed portraits of the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez were propped up at various stops of President Nicolás Maduro's recent whirlwind trip abroad, as the man at the helm of the nation with the world's largest oil reserves begged for bailouts.

Posters of his predecessor also abounded when Mr. Maduro, a former bus driver, arrived home to a carnival-like welcome, as he drove the lead coach of a convoy that snaked through crowds of supporters.

Last week, in a speech before lawmakers, Mr. Maduro, whose approval rating has slipped to 22 percent as the Venezuelan economy teeters on the brink of collapse, again invoked his mentor in predicting a landslide victory in upcoming parliamentary elections. "I have no doubt that Chávez's nation will deliver a great victory in the memory of Hugo Chávez in elections that are being held this year," he said.

Since he was voted into office in April 2013 by a minuscule margin after Mr. Chávez's death, Mr. Maduro has leaned heavily on the legacy of his predecessor, a populist who governed poorly but had magnetic charisma and shrewd political instincts. Woefully lacking on both fronts, Mr. Maduro has become increasingly erratic and despotic in a quest for political survival that seems more daunting by the day. Healthy oil export revenue allowed Mr. Chávez to build a robust network of patronage and create generous welfare programs during his 14 years in power. Those are becoming increasingly paltry on Mr. Maduro's watch.

The tumbling price of oil, which accounts for 95 percent of Venezuela's export earnings, has nearly destroyed an economy that has been managed dismally for years. Inflation rose to 64 percent last year. On Wednesday, the International Monetary Fund predicted that Venezuela's economy would contract 7 percent in 2015, which could force Mr. Maduro's government to default on its loans or significantly curtail the subsidized oil his country provides to allies in the Caribbean, including Cuba.

Mr. Maduro has been vague about the type of painful economic measures his government has been willing to embrace, yet he bafflingly has promised to expand social programs and raise salaries. Far from acknowledging responsibility for the crisis, he and his loyalists have blamed the revenue shortfalls on political opponents they accuse of enabling an international conspiracy.

They have jailed one of the most prominent figures in the opposition, Leopoldo López, since last February on trumped up charges of stoking violent protests a year ago. During Mr. López's Kafkaesque trial, which is still in process, prosecutors have argued that he instigated bloodshed through subliminal messages.

Last month, the authorities in Venezuela charged another opposition leader, María Corina Machado, with plotting to assassinate Mr. Maduro — a ludicrous, unfounded allegation against another inspiring challenger.

The crackdown on the opposition, unobstructed by a weak and compromised press, appears to be an effort to divert attention from Venezuelans' deteriorating quality of life. Security forces have been deployed to maintain order outside supermarkets, where people line up for hours to scrounge whatever is left on depleted shelves.

On a recent afternoon, a Venezuelan woman who had been waiting in line since 4 a.m. showed a television journalist from Al Jazeera English her forearm, where someone had written the number 413 with a black marker to establish her place in line. "Now we are like cattle," the woman lamented. "This must end."

Hours later, Mr. Maduro's government responded with its standard effort to find a scapegoat for the national calamity. The head of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, in a televised address, called the journalist, Mónica Villamizar, an American spy.