The Venezuelan Coup Revisited: Silencing the Evidence

By Gregory Wilpert

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Whatever one’s opinion of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, one thing is certain: The coup attempt against him on April 11, 2002, together with the tumultuous events leading up to it, were a pivotal moment in the country’s recent history. Unsurprisingly, in the context of deep political polarization in Venezuela at the time, accounts of how the coup took place often constitute partisan positions, as political opponents wage battles to define the truth of what happened.

All sides agree that a massacre took place on April 11 in El Silencio (the Silence), a historic district in the heart of downtown Caracas. Sometime between 2:30 and 3:20 p.m., gunmen began firing on opposition demonstrators as they marched on the Miraflores presidential palace to demand Chávez’s resignation (there is some dispute about exactly when the first shots were fired). Nineteen people were killed, including seven opposition demonstrators, seven Chavista counter-demonstrators, and five bystanders, together with about 60 wounded. By that evening, Chávez would be out of office, only to return 47 hours later after the implosion of the provisional government.

There are two principal narratives, Chavista and opposition, of how this extraordinary series of events took place. The first, most widely accepted version has it that Chávez was arrested by opposition-allied military officers on the pretense that he ordered the attack on the demonstrators; the coup plotters then proceeded to dismantle all state institutions in order to establish a dictatorship. But as the population and loyal military officers realized what was happening, they overthrew the coup plotters and returned Chávez to office.

The second version, told by the hardcore opposition, holds that there was no coup as such. In this telling, Chávez really did order the Venezuelan military, as well as Chavista paramilitary thugs, to shoot the demonstrators. When Chávez’s generals, refusing to obey, confronted the president, he resigned, admitting defeat. The military and civil society then handed the presidency to businessman Pedro Carmona, but the “transition” was short-lived because Carmona was betrayed by officers who at first supported him because they were angry at being excluded from the new government. This in turn provided Chávez an opening to return to power with the help of loyalists within the military.

Given these very different accounts, and the very different implications they have for making sense of contemporary Venezuela, any effort to provide a thorough, balanced investigation of the coup and the events surrounding it should be welcomed. This is especially the case for those of us in the United States, where the media have long portrayed Chávez as a dictator and a threat to U.S. interests. Moreover, clarifying exactly how the coup attempt happened, as well as the violence that precipitated it, is important because assessing who was responsible for it—Chávez, the opposition, or some combination of the two—has important consequences for evaluating the Chávez presidency as a whole.

Until recently there have been only three in-depth written accounts of the coup in English—a chapter in Bart Jones’s Chávez biography (¡Hugo!, Steerforth Press, 2007), an article by the blogger Francisco Toro (“The Untold Story of Venezuela’s 2002 April Crisis,” available at CaracasChronicles.com), and an article by myself for the website Venezuelanalysis.com (“The 47-Hour Coup That Changed Everything”). Now a book-length treatment is available: Brian Nelson’s The Silence and the Scorpion, an account six years in the making that promises an inves-
tigation based on information “from every available source.”

Unfortunately, the best that can be said about the book is that it is very readable, providing wonderfully detailed firsthand accounts of the coup. Nelson weaves together a series of short chapters, each based on interviews with one of his 19 sources—four opposition marchers, three pro-Chávez demonstrators, three journalists, four politicians, and five military generals—all of whom witnessed the events of April 11, 12, and 13 from various angles as participants. Three of these sources, however, provide the bulk of the narrative: generals Efraín Vásquez Velasco and Manuel Rosendo, and former finance minister Francisco Usón. Not only are all three vehemently anti-Chávez, but two of them, Rosendo and Vásquez Velasco, the supreme commander of the armed forces and the head of the army at the time, respectively, were instrumental to the coup’s initial success. If they had not rejected Chávez as commander in chief on April 11, the president would likely never have been forced out of office.

The book fails to clarify what actually happened largely because, while uncritically relying on these sources, Nelson ignores evidence that contradicts their testimony. Moreover, he leaves it unclear as to whether the book is meant as an objective description or merely a narrative version of his informants’ interviews. One is tempted to think the latter, since he never corrects their outright falsehoods, such as Vásquez Velasco’s claim that Chávez “had always dreamed of a socialist Venezuela,” when in fact Chávez did not begin talking about socialism until 2005. Nelson also accepts barely credible claims that Chávez supports Colombia’s FARC guerrillas, a belief that contributed to Vásquez Velasco’s disenchantment with Chávez.

Nelson biases his readers from the start by presenting the story of the coup through his opposition sources’ eyes, blurring his own omniscient narrator’s voice with theirs (the chapters based on Chavista sources, though not hostile, are generally perfunctory). By following his three main sources’ lead, Nelson endorses a third, less prominent version of the coup story: that of the moderate opposition, which splits the difference between the two above-described narratives. According to this version, Chávez was behind the violence and deserved to be thrown out; Nelson, following his source Usón, likens Chávez to the fabled scorpion who lashes out violently, even to his own detriment, because violence is his nature.

But, according to Nelson, Carmona was little better, betraying his moderate allies in the military and the oil workers’ union as he went about abolishing the country’s democratic institutions and rescinding the constitution. This is what makes Nelson’s version “moderate”: It denounces both Chávez and Carmona as totalitarians. But most of the blame for the events of April 11 rests on Chávez’s shoulders, according to Nelson.

The question of how to apportion responsibility in this case is perhaps the most important issue touched on in the book. Any serious attempt to do so must answer a series of interrelated questions, while considering all the evidence and adequately interrogating sources’ biases: Were the military generals who refused to obey Chávez justified in doing so? To what extent, if any, was Chávez responsible for the
violence leading up to the coup? And was there a premeditated conspiracy to overthrow Chávez?

WERE ROSENDÓ AND VASQUEZ VELASCO justified in rebelling against Chávez? When Chávez realized the opposition march was definitely heading for the presidential palace, where he and his administration were at the time, he ordered Rosendo to implement Plan Ávila, which would have mobilized the military into the streets of Caracas. Exactly what Plan Ávila is supposed to do lies at the core of the dispute over whether the generals’ rebellion was justified. Rosendo refused to implement the operation on the grounds that, as a military plan to retake the streets during some kind of violent disruption, it would lead to bloodshed, since the army is not trained for crowd control. Following Rosendo, Nelson repeatedly describes Plan Ávila as the same plan initiated during the caracazo of 1989, when the Venezuelan military killed between 500 and 2,000 rioting and protesting poor people in the wake of an IMF-imposed structural adjustment program.

But according to General Jorge García Carneiro, a Chávez loyalist, and others in the military, Plan Ávila had been changed since 1989 and was intended only to protect vital government buildings—in this case Miraflores, which Chávez believed opposition demonstrators meant to storm by force. Nelson doesn’t mention this debate and describes Plan Ávila as Chávez’s “nuclear option,” leaving it at that.

Furthermore, Rosendo’s rationale for refusing to implement Plan Ávila is presented with no discussion. But if Rosendo honestly believed the operation would lead to civilian deaths, why did he not make this point during a meeting with Chávez, his cabinet, and the top military commanders on April 7, when he told the president that he would readily implement Plan Ávila? This is discussed in Jones’s ¡Hugo! and was told to Jones by three independently interviewed witnesses who attended that meeting. Nelson does not mention Jones’s finding, even though he cites his book on other issues.

Skeptics of Chávez’s stated reason for activating Plan Ávila, protecting Miraflores, argue that he should have instead called in more National Guard troops. After all, Venezuela’s National Guard is trained and equipped for crowd control, while the army is not. This is true, except that most of the National Guard on April 11 was under the command of rebellious officers who had earlier refused to execute Chávez’s order to block the opposition march from reaching the palace. In the end, Chávez could rely on only a small handful of National Guard troops, who stopped the opposition’s advance on two of the three streets leading to Miraflores. This is also left out of Nelson’s account.

Next, was Chávez responsible for the dead and wounded on April 11? Yes, according to the opposition, because after failing to persuade his generals to implement Plan Ávila, he encouraged armed members of the Bolivarian Circles, grassroots Chavista organizations, to shoot opposition demonstrators. This claim relies on a single piece of questionable evidence: the testimony of Rosendo’s personal assistant, who says he overheard Defense Minister José Vicente Rangel tell Caracas mayor Freddy Bernal to order Bolivarian Circle members to arm themselves with rocks and sticks to scare opposition demonstrators. Although Rangel vehemently denied having ever told Bernal such a thing, even if he did, this is not the same as giving an order to shoot opposition demonstrators.

Then there is the by now iconic video footage of Chávez supporters on the Puente Llaguno overpass firing handguns in the direction of the opposition march. At the time, this footage, aired repeatedly for weeks by the private Venezuelan media, was the most damning evidence of a Chavista conspiracy to murder opposition demonstrators. According to opposition sympathizers and to Nelson, these shooters were likely responsible for most of the casualties, both among the opposition and Chavistas. Chávez supporters routinely counter-argue that the footage failed to show who they were shooting at: not demonstrators, but metropolitan police officers who were also shooting. Moreover, the opposition demonstration was by that time at least 1,650 feet away and thus out
of the effective range of the Chavista shooters’ handguns.

Nelson rebuts this, arguing that even if the shooters were aiming for the police, they might still have killed opposition demonstrators, since handguns can have enough force to kill or injure someone at 2,640 feet, even though their effective range is about 825 to 990 feet. While this might be true, if unlikely, Nelson again leaves out crucial information, this time from Claves de una masacre, a video investigation by Ángel Palacios that is widely available online.

The documentary provides strong, credible evidence that the Llaguno shooters did not begin shooting until a full 43 minutes after the last opposition demonstrator was shot (the film uses time markers to establish this, including public speeches and close-ups of demonstrators’ wristwatches). This is why they were later exonerated after spending a year in prison—they were acting in self-defense against the metropolitan police, who started shooting at them first, as amateur video included in the documentary clearly shows.

Who, then, shot the demonstrators? While several opposition deaths appear to have been caused by people firing from street level, many of the victims, according to both opposition and Chavista witnesses, were shot by snipers located in the surrounding buildings, although this remains an unresolved question. But Nelson almost completely dismisses the notion of snipers, preferring his theory that the Llaguno shooters were primarily responsible. Once again, he ignores important evidence.

Footage in Claves de una masacre and taped police radio communications seem to suggest that plainclothes metropolitan police were sniping on the opposition demonstration, and even their own uniformed compatriots at street level, from a building called La Nacional. In the footage, uniformed police in the midst of the demonstration can clearly be seen taking cover from unknown shooters who appear to be firing from inside La Nacional. While this building belonged to the pro-Chávez inner-Caracas municipality, the radio recordings, which were presented in the trial against the heads of the metropolitan police force, indicate that police had infiltrated it. In the recording, police chief Henry Vivas says, “Our officers are infiltrated in this building; we have personnel infiltrated in that building.” Then another police officer responds, “It seems there is a group of officers in La Nacional, in civilian [clothing]. Be very careful so that there is no confusion among ourselves.” Shortly thereafter an agitated police officer at street level exclaims, “They are shooting at us! Do not shoot! Do not shoot!” (The recording is available at radio mundial.com.)

Not mentioning any of this, Nelson suggests that if there were snipers, they must have been placed by Chávez, not by the opposition. Why? Because the scorpion-like Chávez supposedly wanted bloodshed so that he could blame the opposition for it, thereby discrediting his opponents. But this is speculation. Since we ultimately do not know who the shooters in the surrounding buildings were, it seems to all boil down to guessing who was more likely to have attacked their own supporters: Chávez or the opposition coup plotters. Nelson concludes that it was likely Chávez.

This brings us to our final question: Was there a premeditated opposition plot to overthrow Chávez? And if there was such a plot—as many opposition leaders admitted, on camera, on April 12—who really would have had more to gain from the deaths in national and international public opinion? I, for one, find it much more plausible that extremist elements in the opposition believed that killing demonstrators would be necessary to justify the coup. This theory, of a premeditated opposition plan to murder Venezuelans, gains credibility if, once again, we take into account evidence that Nelson ignores. First, there is the suggestive fact that the top opposition march leaders—Guaido Lameda, Carlos Molina, Pedro Carmona, and Carlos Ortega—all left the march just minutes before the shooting began. Then, more compellingly, there is the testimony of former CNN en Español reporter Otto Neustadt.

On April 10, the day before the opposition march, a friend of Neustadt’s asked him to videotape a pronouncement of top military officers against the president, mentioning then that

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they expected opposition marchers to die. The following day, at about 2 p.m., Neustaldt made the video recording, which included Vice Admiral Héctor Ramírez Pérez reading a statement in which he said that six demonstrators had already been killed. But the first death did not happen until 2:30 or even 3:20 (depending on whose investigation you believe). Even if Neustaldt got the timing wrong and some demonstrators had already been killed, it was not until much later that six people were dead. In an interview at CaracasChronicles.com, Nelson says he did not mention Neustaldt’s testimony (which was videotaped) because he was unable to personally interview him.

Nelson’s theories on the coup aside, we should note the many other flawed claims he makes about Chávez in the course of his narrative—for example, that Chávez maintains dictatorial control over the Venezuelan legislature and judiciary; that he aids and collaborates with Colombian guerrillas; that he provided Bolivarian Circles with paramilitary training; that he plans to “Cubanize” Venezuela; that he allied with Saddam Hussein; that his economic policies have been disastrous; the list goes on. Suffice it to say that Nelson’s handling of these allegations is no less problematic than his treatment of the coup, but I do not have space here to adequately deal with them. Let me conclude with a final comment on a crucial point: the role of Venezuela’s private opposition media in the coup.

Nelson mentions some of the media’s activities, such as calling on people to join the march on Miraflores; refusing to broadcast the counter-demonstrations in Chávez’s favor; and, in the case of one network, Venevisión, hosting a meeting of the coup’s key players. But Nelson minimizes their near total involvement.

For example, Attorney General Isaías Rodríguez had to trick the TV stations into broadcasting a press conference in which he planned to denounce what was happening as a coup. Telling them that he would only announce his resignation, Rodríguez managed to get on air but was cut off as soon as he said “coup.” TV commentator Napoleón Bravo did his part for the coup when he read what he claimed to be Chávez’s resignation letter, which in reality Chávez had never signed. And the near continuous broadcasting of the Llaguno footage, with the unsupported claim that the shooters were firing on opposition demonstrators, was perhaps the most important piece of media falsification to justify the coup to Venezuelans and to international public opinion.

These and other examples of media complicity are crucial for understand-