Global Campaigning, NGOs and movements

By Jesus Morales

Campaign S.O.S VENEZUELA
1. Introducing the crisis in Venezuela:

At the beginning of February 2014, a group of students from the Universidad Nacional Experimental del Táchira (Experimental University of Táchira) protested against the sexual assault of another student from the same University. This protest coincided at a time when Venezuela is also battling a severe economic crisis, shortage of basic goods, rampant corruption, poor public services and features in the top five for murder and kidnaping worldwide. The protest was repressed by the government and most students were detained.

On February 5th, other university students around the country protested against the student’s detention by the police. However, many of the new student protesters were also imprisoned. Two opposing politicians, Leopoldo Lopez (eventually detained on February 18th by the Maduro’s government, Leopoldo is accused for determiner degree of fire, public incitement to violence, damage to public property and conspiracy), and Maria Corina Machado, tried to capitalize on the wave of discontentment by calling for

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Photos above: #1 Students protesting in Venezuela, #2 Leopoldo Lopez detained by national guard on February 18th, 2014.
new protests under the slogan “La Salida” (The Way Out). They aimed to pressure for President Maduro’s resignation, which in the last presidential election held on April 14th was questioned by a large sector of the country.

According to Human Rights Watch

“The April 2013 presidential election, held weeks after the death of President Hugo Chávez, resulted in a narrow victory for Chávez’s hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro, according to Venezuelan electoral authorities. The Supreme Court and the National Electoral Council rejected appeals filed by the opposition candidate, Henrique Capriles Radonski, challenging the results. The controversy over the results touched off street demonstrations and counterdemonstrations, which led to at least nine deaths and dozens of injured, as well as excessive use of force and arbitrary detentions by security forces”.3

On February 12th, 2014, the protest increased to over 18 cities around the country and continued to push for the release of all detainees and the rejection of the government. However, repression against protesters not only uses police and military enforcement agencies, it also incorporates the participation of militia groups called “Colectivos” (collectives) to violently dissolve the protests and President Maduro

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3 Human Right Watch. 2013 Available from: https://www.hrw.org/node/106212

Photo above: Colectivos
has publicly encouraged these groups, naming them as patriotic revolutionaries in defense of Venezuela’s interests.⁴

Human rights organizations report that the number of detainees nationally (many of them already released) has surpassed 500 people⁵, and they have suffered torture, including reports of sexual assault, cruel treatment and inhumane and degrading conditions. As this is being written, 40 people have been murdered in the context of the protests.

The main way how Venezuelans have distributed information about the protests is through social media, because the government controls all the TV stations and has threatened with severe sanctions, including indefinite shutdowns, to radio stations and newspaper that transmit information about the protests. The use of smart phones has allowed civilians to distribute videos and photos of acts of aggression by government forces.⁶

2. Brief summary of S.O.S Venezuela

S.O.S Venezuela started on February 14th, 2014, as an alternative communication media strategy by Haydee Izaguirre who created a website and Facebook page to broadcast the student protests and provide a current situation in Venezuela, which primarily


intended to fill the gap on information due to the national media blackout created by the Government of Venezuela. The page’s popularity increased rapidly, becoming viral with thousands of people uploading videos and photos of the Venezuelan protests; and within five days the page has reported over 138,000 followers, in the three weeks since these numbers have continued to grow to over 180,000 followers from 56 countries. By the next month, Haydee and her group of seven volunteers have published thousands of pieces of content generating over 72 million impressions and 1.8 million interactions (likes, comments) with users from 100 countries, advocating Human Rights activism by a secure platform for Venezuelans. Beyond “like-tivism” S.O.S Venezuela has succeeded in allowing people from all over the world to participate actively by gathering signatures, creating awareness in the international community and by encouraging politicians from different countries to denounce Human Right violations against the students in the Caribbean country.


An example to the scope reached by S.O.S Venezuela overseas:

Sydney-Australia

Bilbao-Spain

Norway

Dubai

Valladolid-Spain

Bournemouth-England

Photo from: http://sos-venezuela-se-desarrolla-a-nivel-mundial-fotos

Photo from: http://cifrasonlinecomve.wordpress.com/2014/02/22/sos-venezuela-se-desarrolla-a-nivel-mundial-se-suman-mas-paises-fotos/

Photo from: http://cifrasonlinecomve.wordpress.com/2014/02/22/sos-venezuela-se-desarrolla-a-nivel-mundial-se-suman-mas-paises-fotos/

Photo from sos-venezuela-se-desarrolla-a-nivel-mundial-fotos

Photo from: http://www.lapatilla.com/site/2014/03/15/sos-nocturno-venezuela-fotos/

Photo from: http://www.lapatilla.com/site/2014/03/15/sos-nocturno-venezuela-fotos/
Caracas-Venezuela

University of Georgia- USA

Panama

Central Park NY-USA

Uruguay

Portugal

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15 Photo from coups-media-and-stalemates-whats-happening-in-venezuela
16 Photo from: http://www.redandblack.com/uganews/campus/students-send-sos-join-worldwide-movement-supporting-venezuelan-protestors/article_7f0551a-9c0d-11e3-a1dc-0017a43b2370.html
18 Photo from: http://impliedinference.wordpress.com/2014/02/23/sosvenezuela-nyc-
massive-central-park-turnout-in-support-of-venezuela/
19 Photo from: http://www.hacer.org/latam/?p=36535
Paraguay

Guatemala

And so on.

3. S.O.S Venezuela took international ground:

In reaction to the scale of protests, numerous deaths and media censorship in Venezuela and accompanied by Venezuelans communities living overseas, some countries have declared its position regarding the current situation.

Different reactions in support to the Venezuelan Government, showed by its traditional allies around the globe and political allies, accuse that the country is under attack by ‘Fascists’, ‘oligarchs’, ‘the CIA’, ‘The American Empire’ and so on, in order to destroy a legitimized democratic Nation. On the other hand, other countries showed their concerns in the use of repressive force against protesters that resulted in many deaths, as well human rights violations committed by the military forces and “Colectivos” to the detained students, and the media blackout to the protests on national TV. Furthermore, there was neutrality from some countries which neither support nor question the Venezuelan government’s measures on this issue. See image 1 below

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21 Photo from: http://eslibertad.org/2014/02/23/estudiantes-apoyo-a-sos-venezuela/
22 Photo from: http://eslibertad.org/2014/02/23/estudiantes-apoyo-a-sos-venezuela/
Image 1: Countries that have expressed their position in regards to the current students protests in Venezuela. 

Legend:

- Countries that support the Venezuelan government and classified the student protests as an attempt to destabilize and / or coup the country.
- Countries that rejected the violence and criticized the "violation of human rights" in the country, as well as the "lack of freedom of expression"; without forgetting for call a dialogue call between the polarized political sectors.
- Countries which merely express concern regretted deaths and / or called for a dialogue.
- Countries with which the Venezuelan government broke diplomatic relations after these expressed their opinion.

23 Image from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venezuela_2014_protestas_reaciones_internacionales.png
These international expositions took an important milestone when the government of Panama brought together all members of the OAS (Organization of American States) to discuss the recent human rights violations in Venezuela during the student’s protest on February this year and that still continues today; Panama offered a seat into the OAS's permanent council to the Venezuelan government's opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, in order to speak up for the Venezuelan students among all the members of the Hemisphere (except Cuba). As a result, the Maduro’s government has retaliated against Panama by breaking diplomatic relations with the Central American country.

A noticeable success from the international pressure to the Maduro’s administration is that the Venezuelan government had to sit side by side with the opposition’s main leaders in a National Peace Conference held in Caracas on April 17th, 2014. This kind of meeting was unthinkable when Chavez was the head of State.²⁴


Photo above: #1 Maria Corina Machado at the OAS, #2 President Maduro, #3 Opposition leaders, Capriles and Maduro during the National Peace Conference.
4. S.O.S Venezuela main strengths are:

- Globalized access in communications, the student’s protests emerged in a moment when technology in mobile devices is used by most Venezuelan students which gives them a useful tool to monitor the protests by taking photos and uploading videos, within a few seconds, to share it with S.O.S Venezuela's Facebook page, about all the events occurring in every protest in the country and overseas.

- The media blackout, censorship and government’s control on national TV and press that threat the freedom of speech in Venezuela (not reliable state media), control which is measured by strict laws that applies punishment, including severe fines up to US $2,000,000\(^25\) and definitive shutdown to any media that intend to cover any protest on live; cases such as NTN24 (Colombia-based News TV channel) was closed in Venezuela after broadcasting a video of a student killed by a gunshot to the head in Caracas. Consequently, S.O.S Venezuela has emerged as an alternative media with broad attention to the student protests and it was welcomed by the Venezuelan government’s opposition supporters, as an important source of information in a polarized society.

- High number of Venezuelans living overseas, on the Chavez era between 1999 and 2013 Venezuela witnessed unprecedented human capital flight. Despite this, there is not an exact official number of Venezuelans-born migrating to overseas.
during the fourteen years Chavez presidency. According to Andreina Seijas, editor of the for Americas Quarterly, a Venezuela-born specialist in Venezuela’s migration says “some experts estimate that about 1 million Venezuelans have fled their home country, 3.5 percent of the country’s population”. This phenomenon occurs because of the lack of opportunities, Chavez’ socialist policies and uncontrolled violence in the country; according to Carmen Núñez, a Venezuelan psychologist she asserts that “flight of human capital is found in the uncertainty and professional instability faced by those citizens who don’t support the ideals of the Bolivarian revolution, as well as the negative outcomes of the economic policies implemented by the Chávez’s government”. Most Venezuelans who are living overseas have a strong rejection to the Chavez’ hand-picked political successor, Nicolas Maduro, who is currently running the country and following Chavez’ doctrine using the same economic strategies in public policies. According to Venezuela's National Electoral Council, results from the last Venezuelan presidential election held in April 2013, showed a total of 100,495 Venezuelans voters registered abroad and about 62.11% of them cast their ballots in the April election, with 92.47% of the overseas vote going for Mr. Capriles. Hence, the Venezuelan community overseas rely on S.O.S Venezuela as an important source of news on Venezuela’s current student protests and they are willing to support their home country by doing what is necessary to spread the word worldwide.

5. S.O.S main weaknesses are:

- Non-NGO status. S.O.S Venezuela has not been institutionalized as a formal non-profit organization; hence it does not count as a legal entity which allows it to receive charitable donations from the public. S.O.S Venezuela is mainly a volunteer project with insufficient funds to increase operations and tackle Human rights violations in Venezuela. This legal status incapacity does not allow the organization to acquire donations or sponsor fundraising projects to overcome financial issues.

- Uncertainty in a well-structured platform. Despite such accelerated growth and being embraced by the Venezuelan community, S.O.S Venezuela still does not have a central office that facilitates organizational strategies in order to establish and coordinate programs and procedures in regards to the Human Rights situation in Venezuela. Even though S.O.S Venezuela works mainly at Haydee’s house in the USA and mobilizes people (volunteers) worldwide, it may be beneficial whether she extends S.O.S Venezuela’s influence in the country by consolidating an official headquarters in order to recruit professionals interested in this project.

- Government repression. The Venezuelan government during the Chavez’ mandate and Maduro’s administration were strict in regards to criticism. The government controlled all the state’s institutions to constitute a network able to counteract and punish other political view that interfered with their ideas in the self-called “The Bolivarian revolution”. The detained political prisoners became
a common method in order to threat other people who attempt to follow same path in criticizing the Venezuelan government, an example of this is the case of Leopoldo Lopez and most recently the arrest of San Cristobal Mayor Daniel Ceballos made in a Caracas hotel by agents from the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service. According to Human Right Watch “While many Venezuelans continue to criticize the government, the prospect of facing similar reprisals—in the form of arbitrary or abusive state action—has undercut the ability of judges to adjudicate politically sensitive cases, and forced journalists and rights defenders to weigh the consequences of publicizing information and opinions that are critical of the government”. Therefore, S.O.S Venezuela faces much high risk by covering the events whether it is established as a formal source of information in a country with a low tolerance level of criticism and poor independent government institutions.

- Decrease in audience. After a while it is that the street protests could reach its maximum peak and then its attention is likely to decrease, causing people to lose interest in S.O.S Venezuela’s cause, its website and seeking further information.

To finalize, S.O.S Venezuela had the opportunity to fill a vital information gap that the Venezuelan government has created on its people. Despite a lack of preparation and unexpected popularity, S.O.S Venezuela has unified. There are sentiments among many

Venezuelans who claim for a significant change to their country. Notwithstanding, there are interesting challenges in the near future that S.O.S Venezuela confront, in order to maintain their levels of audience, reliability and evolve as a professional information platform. So far this organization has had the courage to inspire many people to take action, in a call for help, for their motherland.

My special thanks to Haydee Izaguirre

Whom I interviewed for this work.