

FINANCIAL TIMES

Venezuela's attorney-general puts regime on trial

Luisa Ortega has transformed from government loyalist to powerful opposition voice

Gideon Long, Andean Correspondent

Luisa Ortega would seem an unlikely figure to spearhead opposition to Venezuela's unpopular president Nicolás Maduro.

For most of the 10 years she has served as attorney-general, the 59-year-old lawyer has been a loyal servant to the state apparatus, sentencing several government opponents to jail terms, including Leopoldo López, one of the country's most popular politicians, who remains behind bars.

But this year, Ms Ortega has re-invented herself. Since the protests against the Maduro regime began in late March, she has become the single most potent voice speaking out against the government from within the ranks of "Chavismo", the socialist movement founded by the country's late leader Hugo Chávez.

On Tuesday, she denounced the Supreme Court as an illegitimate and unconstitutional "circus" and repeated her opposition to President Maduro's plan for a new assembly with powers to re-write the constitution.

In a deepening of the country's institutional crisis, Ms Ortega refused to turn up to a Supreme Court hearing at which she was accused of dereliction of duty. Instead, she gave an impassioned televised address, berating both the court and Mr Maduro. "Sovereign power does not lie with the president, it lies with the people," she said, to warm applause from those in the room.

Across Caracas, the Supreme Court held its hearing anyway and, in a further snub to Ms Ortega, rejected her candidate for the job of deputy attorney-general and

swore in a rival — Katherine Harrington, a Maduro loyalist who has been blacklisted by the US.

Ms Harrington was one of seven Venezuelan officials subjected to sanctions by then-US president Barack Obama in 2015. Her assets in the US were frozen and she was banned from entering the country. Ms Ortega said on Tuesday that she would refuse to recognise Ms Harrington in her post.

In her hour-long address, the attorney-general lambasted the Maduro regime, recalling the 90 people who had died in three months of anti-government protests. She said that more than 4,600 people had been arrested and injured during the uprisings and gave an insight into the difficulties of day-to-day life for many Venezuelans.

“Go and take a look at the queues outside the bakeries!” she said. “I step outside my house and there are four or five queues. Go and look at the queues outside the supermarkets! Go and try to find medicines for people with hypertension or eyedrops for those with glaucoma!”

Ms Ortega’s rebellion is remarkable given her background. Born in the central state of Guárico in 1958, Ms Ortega earned her law degree from the University of Carabobo then studied at two prestigious universities in Caracas. She is married to Germán Ferrer, a socialist member of the National Assembly.

Appointed attorney-general in 2007, she was a close confidante of then-president Hugo Chávez and was on the front row during his funeral in Caracas in 2013. When protests against Mr Maduro erupted the following year, Ms Ortega was part of the crackdown, sentencing government opponents to jail terms, including Mr López.

But this year things have been different. Her metamorphosis began when the Supreme Court tried to strip the opposition-controlled National Assembly of its powers in March. Ms Ortega declared it “a rupture in the constitutional order”.

A month later, when Mr Maduro announced his plan to re-write the 1999 constitution, Ms Ortega opposed it. She has also condemned the use of military courts to try dozens of young protesters, and accused the National Guard of using excessive force against them.

Her volte-face has turned her into a hate figure for Mr Maduro's supporters, as witnessed at a pro-government rally in May. "Ortega, fascist! She supports terrorists!" a group of red-shirted Chavistas chanted as they marched through the city's streets. And then, more ominously: "Ortega, traitor! Your time will come!"

Last week, the Supreme Court froze Ms Ortega's bank account, stripped her of her assets, barred her from leaving the country and ordered her to appear before the court to explain herself. Ms Ortega responded by claiming that Venezuela was suffering "state terrorism".

David Smilde, a senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America, said he is not surprised by Ms Ortega's recent stance. "She is a long-time human rights activist who has always conceived of Chavismo as an expansion of rights," he said. "What surprises me much more is that there have not been more Chavista officials and dissidents following her lead."

"In doing what she has done she took a high-level risk and her only hope of success was that other moderate Chavista officials would follow her."

It remains to be seen what the Supreme Court will do next. Some analysts say they expect it to try to strip Ms Ortega of her powers and replace her with Ms Harrington. They also say that the Maduro regime might try to jail Ms Ortega, a move sure to provoke international outcry.

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