

VENEZUELA: FROM POPULISM TO SOCIALIST REVOLUTION?

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My intention in this short essay is to try to answer the following questions: Has there been a revolution in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez? Are we currently witnessing one? What is the political nature of Chavismo and how should we characterize it? Where will this political process, the "Bolivarian Revolution", probably lead to?

Some Preliminary Words on Populism.

Populism in Latin America is not a very precise concept and it has been used in the past to characterize a wide range of political practices. Still, I believe it is a useful concept which helps to understand a certain disease of mass politics, a disease that results from the combination of frustration and demagoguery.

In its various Latin American incarnations, populism has been composed of five key ingredients: frustrated masses, charismatic leadership, a messianic impulse, the ability on the part of the charismatic leader to provide economic and/or symbolic gratifications to the masses, and the creation and deliberate magnification of an "external threat" used both for purposes of mobilization and also to legitimize domestic repression.

The current case in Venezuela contains all of these elements, yet it also has important peculiarities of its own: First there is Hugo Chávez's overgrown self-conception about his historical role as a new Latin American liberator, a vision which drives him beyond the well-trodden paths of traditional populism. Second, the seriousness with which he assumes his fundamental aim: none other than bringing about a shift in the global geopolitical balance of power against the United States, the West, capitalism and representative democracy, and in favor of an as yet ill-defined "XXIst Century Socialism". And finally, the fact that Chávez personally controls, without any institutional constraints, Venezuela's oil wealth. Oil has given him the wherewithal not only to provide the Venezuelan poor with economic and symbolic gratifications, but also to project his revolutionary message abroad, and to finance a major regional propaganda campaign to support this message.

Radical Populism is not a Revolution

Venezuela under Chávez has experienced important political and socioeconomic changes, but these do not amount to a true socialist revolution in the sense that Cuba, for instance, had one. It could even be reasonably argued that in some basic aspects of Venezuelan national life, Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution has only deepened some of the more negative developments of the last five decades in the country's history.

The old party elites who held power during the so-called *puntofijista* period (1958-1998) have all but disappeared, and a new civil-military group is ruling the country. The private economic sector has lost most of the power and influence it once had as the expansion of the state's controls over the economy grows apace. There is a more marked presence of the military in government functions, and the still-valid 1999 Constitution defines a new balance in civil-military relations against civilian control and in favor of the institutional autonomy of the military. There has also been a rapid and massive transfer of power from all institutions to the Presidency of the Republic, including, most importantly, PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela, the national oil company) and the Central Bank. The process of administrative decentralization in favor of the country's different regions and away from the central government has been largely reversed. All political parties are now fragmented and weakened, including the President's own party, a process that goes hand in hand with the personalization of politics and the overwhelming role played by Chávez himself.

Over the last eight years the Venezuelan economy has become more dependent on oil than ever before, imports have soared and the "petro-state" has never been more parasitic on the oil rent, with its consequent effects on the asphyxiation of domestic industry and agriculture and the further reduction of the productivity and competitiveness of the country as a whole. But oil has also given Chávez the resources to finance government largesse to the poor, solidifying the link between the charismatic leader and his clientele.

The outcome of all this is not a socialist revolution but a situation full of paradoxes and contradictions—exhibiting a wide gap between Chávez's radical rhetoric and reality—presenting those who study contemporary Venezuela with the sad spectacle of a society in which conspicuous consumption coexists with extensive poverty. Venezuela may, however, be about to enter a new phase in its political evolution, for Chávez intends to push forward a Constitutional reform that will, in his view, represent a new and major step in his attempt to advance from mere populism, with its flaws and limitations, to a true socialist revolution.

A Revolution in Foreign Policy?

While it may be argued that there has not yet been a true socialist revolution in Venezuelan domestic affairs, this is not the case in the field of foreign policy, where Venezuela's international relations have undergone profound changes amounting to a broad modification in the country's system of alliances. This is a foreign policy revolution stimulated by a kind of neo-Marxist ideology, impelled by anti-Americanism, financed by oil and notably lacking a sense of proportion on the part of its main protagonist.

Venezuela is a relatively small and highly vulnerable country, completely dependent on oil for its viability as a modern society, and with a population whose sociological and cultural traits are far from bellicose. Therefore it is audacious, to say the least, for Venezuela to pretend to carry out fundamental change in the regional and global geopolitical balance of forces. But this is what Chávez constantly proclaims as his true

goal. The danger of that is that his foreign policy adventurism will lead him and Venezuela into grave and totally unnecessary international entanglements.

On the basis of his revolutionary and anti-American promises, Chávez has built close alliances with Cuba and Iran, purchased large amounts of advanced weapons from Russia and Belarus, actively intervened in other Latin American countries in support of radical left-wing causes, political candidates and militant groups, developed a new strategic doctrine of "asymmetrical warfare" for the armed forces designating the United States as Venezuela's main enemy, and has denounced an imaginary American-led invasion as Venezuela's preeminent strategic threat, while implementing a relentless propaganda offensive in the Western hemisphere and beyond.

In clear contrast to, for example, the Cuban experience, Chávez has tried to project his revolutionary message and influence events abroad before consolidating his "revolution" within Venezuela. According to most public opinion polls carried out in the country over the last eight years, what most Venezuelans want is for the populist system of government handouts to work well, thus protecting the population from the harsh particulars/ramifications of the international market. What the immense majority of Venezuelans certainly do not want is Cuban-style socialism, which is perceived as an utterly failed and hurtful experience to be avoided at all costs. The presence of Cuban medical doctors in the slums of Caracas and other Venezuelan cities is welcomed by the poor, but this does not mean they accept Castro's remedies for society as a whole. Most Venezuelans cherish pluralism and fear non-democratic forms of government.

Thus Chávez's revolution in foreign policy, although significant and disruptive—as shown by its impact in Bolivia and Ecuador, for instance—has a certain sense of illusion/pretense about it, mainly because Venezuela still sells most of its oil to its proclaimed mortal enemy, the United States, but also because no other actor in the Inter-American community seems to consider the dismantling of democracy in Venezuela by Chávez, his gradual destruction of his fellow citizens' freedoms, and his alliances with extra-hemispheric powers and "rogue-states" as a serious matter. It is sad to see the consequences of this lack of attention and/or willingness to understand the Venezuelan descent into dictatorship as it really is: The persistent and peaceful resistance to Chávez's tyrannical aims which has taken place over the last few years, conducted by a committed but leaderless civil society, has passed almost unnoticed under the radars of the regional and international community. Only recently has Chávez seemed to be raising more concerns on the part of other countries in the Western hemisphere. The United States, however, is prudently keeping its distance, possibly aware of the propaganda uses that Chávez would give to the smallest hint of "imperialist" intervention in Venezuela's internal affairs.

The combination of all of these factors—Chávez's relatively slow domestic pace, the gap between his proclaimed objectives and the global realities of power, and the inability of the Venezuelan democratic opposition to show itself to the country and the world as a credible alternative, has placed Venezuela at a crossroads. One side leads to the possible sanctioning of a new Constitution, representing a crucial stepping stone towards openly tyrannical rule by Chávez; the other side leads to the probable transformation of peaceful democratic resistance into a violent one. Is there any other option for Venezuela? Can Chávez's constitutional reform project be stopped by democratic means? What is next for Venezuela?

Constitutional Reform and Political Miscalculation

The survival of populist regimes depends on four main variables: The promotion of class hatred, the cult of personality, the access to resources for redistribution and management of ambiguity. By this last point I mean the ability of populist regimes to steer a middle road between authoritarianism and democracy, between autocracy and the tactical flexibility that avoids alienating some of the groups that make up the populist coalition (in the Venezuelan case many among the poor, parts of the armed forces, and a small sector of the middle class).

Preserving ambiguity has been particularly important to Chávez, as his hidden agenda calls for revolutionary changes in a Marxist direction that are rejected by millions of Venezuelans. But the narrow boundaries of populist ambiguity are proving psychologically and politically unbearable for a leader who thrives in confrontation and thinks in terms of a worldwide geopolitical upheaval. With the financial resources coming from oil totally in his hands, and still enjoying significant support, Chávez could have probably continued to govern comfortably within a traditional Latin American populist framework until his second period ends in five years. But a revolution does not accept time limits, and Chávez has decided that he needs a new Constitution that should achieve two goals simultaneously: First, consolidate his power forever and, second, to provide his indefinite rule with a stamp of democratic legitimacy or, at least, with enough of it to satisfy the rather weak requirements of an Inter-American community that is apparently willing to turn its eyes away from Venezuela for as long as it possibly can.

The new Constitution, which will be submitted to a referendum on December 2, 2007, contains more than three hundred articles and covers in detail the most varied grounds, but its essence was admirably summarized in a *Washington Post* editorial. The new text, if approved, will formally confirm Chávez as *de facto* president for life, completing his transformation into an autocrat: "It would lengthen his presidential term from six to seven years and remove the current limit of two terms, allowing him to serve indefinitely. He would have broad powers to seize property, to dispose of Venezuela's foreign exchange reserves, to impose central government rule on local jurisdictions and to declare indefinite states of emergency under which due process and freedom of information would be suspended". To this must be added that the new text overtly declares that Venezuela's state and economy will become "socialist", its military will now be defined as "anti-imperialist", and it also opens a legal path for establishing future "confederations" of Latin American Republics. Chávez has referred on several occasions to his intention of creating one such confederation between Venezuela and Cuba, and it is quite clear that he intends to play a role in the post-Castro future of the island.

In my view the constitutional reform project is a strategic mistake by Chávez. It is already proving politically costly for him at both domestic and international levels. The *chavista* power-coalition is deeply divided on the issue, and the opposition has been galvanized to fight against a proposal that is perceived, even by many former supporters of the regime, as unacceptable. A former *chavista* Defense Minister characterized Chávez's new Constitution as a *coup d'état*. The new text means the end of ambiguity

and therefore marks a turning point for Venezuela. Despite the divisions and lack of cohesive leadership in the opposition, and institutional abuses by the government concerning the manipulation of the electoral system, it is far from inconceivable that Chávez might experience a defeat in the referendum set for December 2. Opinion polls show the "no" vote as gaining the upper hand, whereas the voting intention in favor of Chávez's reform is going downwards. Even close ideological allies of the President, such as the German-born sociologist Hans Dieterich, are recommending the suspension, for the time being, of the attempt to change the Constitution and the postponement or cancellation of the referendum.

The really important point, however, is that there is increasing awareness in Venezuela and abroad that a new stage in the political confrontation has begun. No matter what happens in the referendum, Hugo Chávez has made it clear to millions of Venezuelans that there will never be democratic reconciliation in the country while he rules. The ambiguities of the past are fast dissipating, as well as the reserves of good will towards the Venezuelan leader, both inside and outside of the country.

I personally do not think that Chávez will postpone or cancel the referendum. He will probably risk it all, confident that the Electoral Council will be there to make sure he wins. But this is a dangerous gamble, for this time the opposition could very well win and the "no" vote could overcome the climate of intimidation, abuse of power and institutional fraud created by the regime. Thus, on December 3 there might be a feeling that, this time, the government lost and its likely repudiation of defeat might generate a more acute political crisis. But even if Chávez wins by a small margin he will find it difficult to persuade the country and the world that Venezuelans truly accept the autocratic state and collectivistic economic model embodied in his new Constitution, a text that, by the way, was concocted almost in secrecy by a subservient National Assembly.

Conclusions

The questions raised at the beginning of this paper have served to provide a continuous undercurrent to this analysis of Venezuelan populism. There has not been a true socialist revolution in Venezuela, yet. On the other hand, however, the changes in the country's international relations have been more radical than those in its domestic policies. *Chávismo* has until now been an experimental variant of Latin-American populism, attempting/pretending to reach beyond its limits and become a socialist-Marxist reality. This combination of factors will lead to Venezuela suffering a profound political and socioeconomic crisis sooner rather than later, a crisis which will culminate either in a Chávez dictatorship or his downfall from power.

The Venezuelan democratic opposition will continue fighting for freedom but, no matter what happens, it will take the country a long time to recover from the current climate of political confrontation, social division, and economic waste developed during Chávez's years. The United States, on its side, should not give excuses to Chávez to wave the "anti-imperialist" flag but, at the same time, should denounce any violation of democratic fair play and fundamental human rights by the Venezuelan regime. As for the democratic governments in Latin America, they may someday regret their excessive tolerance and opportunism with regards to Chávez's antics, but in truth not much more

can be asked from such mediocre leaders, now occupying the space once filled by the likes of Rómulo Betancourt.

Radical populist experiments in Latin America have a tendency to end as a result of economic crisis generated by mismanagement, generalized social protest and chaos, followed by a military uprising. I do not see why this fate will not eventually arrive to the "Bolivarian Revolution." It may be regrettable that a political experiment, which in its beginnings was so warmly received by many who consider themselves democrats, and who are concerned about the inequities of Venezuelan society, should have come to face such a disappointing scenario. But it must be said that this is critically Chávez's own fault. His revolutionary dreams and lack of a sense of proportion are pushing him toward an openly dictatorial rule that will never be accepted by the majority of Venezuelans.