Venezuela's Social Movements

Autonomy's Difficult Path

El Libertario editorial collective

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The modern history of social struggles in Venezuela is associated with the across-the-board transformation of the country brought about by large-scale oil exploitation beginning in the 1920s. This became evident after the death of Dictator J.V. Gomez, who ruled Venezuela with an iron fist from 1908 until December 1935. His demise was the signal for the appearance in the socio-political sphere of diverse collectively-organized actors, recently formed and until then repressed by the dictatorship. These consisted mostly of workers' unions and student associations, but they also included feminist, cultural, peasant, educational, and professional associations.

Since that time (the end of the 1930s through the 1950s), these social movements encountered many difficulties in their struggle for autonomy. On the one hand, during this period the role of the State, as the local administrator of oil capitalism, was consolidated and became more complex. Varying degrees of access to oil-generated income via the state were what principally determined the formation of the social classes that defined that period: bourgeoisie, middle class, proletariat. The State became the great promoter, financier, and producer of the innovations capitalism demands, so it was not interested in alternative modernizing options that arose autonomously out of the social movements. Consequently, it used all the methods available to it to suppress them, mainly through the populist sharing of the crumbs, but sometimes through brutal repression. Those years also witnessed infighting for the control of the State between the armed forces — the classic governmental overseer in the history of our country, and the political parties (especially the social-democratic AD -Accion Democratica, but also the Christian Democrat COPEI, the liberal URD and the Communist Party of Venezuela). Although these parties were born after the emergence of the social organizations, they soon came to control them, by turning social activism into party militancy and relegating the organizations to a subordinate role, their struggles subject to the "party line." An expression of this was their dominant and unique evolution within the trade union movement from the 1940s until at least the decade of the 80s.

After 1983 the oil economy model that had supported the Pact of Punto Fijo entered into crisis, along with the machinery of bipartisan domestication of the social movements. In addition, transnational powers demanded that the state adopt neoliberal economic prescriptions while restricting populist clientele practices (the distribution of government revenues to undercut discontent). In this context, gaps in the country's social and political fabric were created that allowed for the reappearance of significant autonomous social actions, not subordinate to the traditional political parties. This occurred in previously existing organizations as well as in the new social movements: ecological, neighborhood, indigenous, feminist, GLBT groups, to mention only a few. The most dramatic indicator of how much things had changed was the spontaneous popular revolt known as "El Caracazo" (2/27/1989). This was the most powerful manifestation of social discontent in our country's history, which the authoritarian power could only respond to with bloody repression.

The Social Movements' Labyrinth

As bipartisan control over the social movements declined, those in real power needed a replacement, which they found in Hugo Chavez, the leader of the failed military coup of February 4, 1992. Popular anger at the country's situation generated sympathy for the attempted coup, despite a lack of clarity in its leaders' program, and in its aftermath, messianic mirages in favor of Chavez soon appeared. After serving time in prison, Chavez was pardoned in 1994 and became

a presidential candidate, with support from among the bourgeoisie and the transnational corporations, as well as from the majority of the social movements and their activists, whose demands he promised to heed if he won the elections.

Chavez took office in February 1999, and from then until mid-2007 occurred a period during which his relationship with the social movements might be described as "guardedly hopeful." The latter clung to their illusions in him, postponing time and again their agenda for struggle, and subordinating their own demands to those imposed from above, which aimed at consolidating Chavez's power. The results of numerous elections expressed the "people's faith in the process." The social-democrats and the right-wing opposition had similar perspectives: "First let's get rid of Chavez, then we will look at everything else." The star-struck social activists accepted that the State would determine their methods and objectives, thus mortgaging the relative autonomy of action they had won in the previous decade. To this must be added the fact that, thanks to the rise in oil prices, the State once again had large resources to finance its cronies, now armed with leftist verbiage.

From the last months of 2007 till today, many signs have emerged indicating that the honeymoon between the Chavista government and the social antagonists may be a thing of the past. In contrast to previous years of apparent sharp political confrontation but actual demobilization of the social struggles, now collective economic and social demands, silent for so long, are manifesting themselves with increasing force. The State's use of part of its oil revenues to pay off its clients has been limited not only by the fall in the price of "black gold" but also by the corruption, incompetence, and incoherence of the current government, which is but an unredeemed and bloated version of previous ones. As a result, it is harder for Chavism to exert control over the social movements, which simultaneously show signs of no longer buying the pale offers of electoral opposition.

To confirm what we've said, we invite you to look at the statistics on social conflict in Venezuela in the yearly reports of the NGO PROVEA (www.derechos.org.ve), which we consider to be a complete and trustworthy source. For reasons of space it is not possible to repeat those figures here, but they confirm that under the so-called "Socialism of the XXI Century" of Hugo Chavez lies a situation that is similar to that of Latin America's neoliberal right-wing regimes.

Shattered Hopes and the Criminalization of Protest

The PROVEA reports confirm that, today, the struggle for the autonomy of the social movements in Venezuela is faced with a growing criminalization of the movements' activities. This criminalization is fertilized in the judicial sphere with a renovated arsenal of instruments to legalize repression, in the political sphere, with loud accusations from the seat of power that slander all protest as "a move in favor of a coup and imperialism," and in the everyday social realm, with efforts to make Chávez's social base the first to denounce and suppress dissident action, which has brought us para-militarism and "para-repression".

Despite this, instances of autonomous social struggle continue to appear in the most diverse places:

The workers' struggles of Ferrominera, SIDOR, of the retired CANTV workers, and the various struggles in the industrial region of Aragua; the struggles of indigenous people, such as those of

the Yukpas in the Sierra of Perija. The evictions and occupations demanding the right to housing throughout the country; the many protests against the failures and overall scarcity of public services; the sustained anger, both in and outside the prisons, against the barbaric penal system; the clamor of those victimized by the violently repressive apparatus, as exemplified in the Committee of Victims Against Impunity in the State of Lara; in gender struggles, the work done by Casa de la Mujer Juana Ramirez in Maracay; the student protests that suffer judicial persecution that concedes nothing in the way of viciousness to that of the days of the Pact of Punto Fijo.

Meanwhile, the peasants receive promises and alms if they "behave" but get beaten by thugs and the cops if they don't.

Were there, are there, or will there ever be positive perspectives for the social movements in what so-called "Bolivarian Socialism" has to offer? We can only answer NO, since any advance will be negated by the caudillista impositions of an authoritarian regime, under which social activism is forced to bow before the sponsorship, ideology, and control by the State along with sheepish submission to demagogic promises whose successful execution depends on bureaucratic paternalism; with the growing corruption and inefficiency that infect the official sector and its subordinate social organizations; with the socialist agenda converted into a ruse for policies that serve the transnational corporations; and the rise of the "bolibourgeoisie," born and nurtured in the shadow of monstrous governmental corruption. The free and full development of the social movements can only come about if they break with the tutelage that Chavism has exerted over them, while not falling into the hands of the neoliberal right or the social-democracy. The social movements need to articulate ideas and plans of action that emerge out of their own, autonomous activities, in the heat of struggle and informed by the goals that constitute their very reason for being, as shown by the many hopeful signs revealed in the social protests mentioned above.

In these years, we at El Libertario have taken the difficult task of unmasking the debilitating illusions created by the State, Capital and their allies, some with the socialist governmental mask and others with the pseudo-democratic masks of the social-democratic and right-wing opposition. With persistence, we are opening roads for the enthusiastic building of autonomy for the social movements, where we struggle to gain space for direct action, self-management, and mutual aid that we, as anarchists, promote.

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