

Venezuela: Behind the Smokescreen

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November 26, 2007

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Demonised on the one side by Western governments and corporate media, uncritically acclaimed on the other by certain left-wing organizations, an adequate account of Chavez and Venezuela's current political situation is difficult to find. Accusations alleging a "Communist dictatorship" should simply be dismissed as misinformed, sensationalist and ideological devices. Chavez's claims of leading a democratic and progressive transition towards an egalitarian society however, are deceptive. Using a few examples, I will try to illustrate the intricate Venezuelan map, a combination of some positive social reforms and worrying tendencies of centralization of power, cult to personality and corruption.

Social reforms and the economy

Venezuela has historically been an extremely unequal society and the social programmes initiated by the Bolivarian Revolution (named after the anti-Spanish liberator Simon Bolivar) have been better news for the poor. These include literacy programmes for millions of children and adults, the creation of thousands of primary medical units in the poorest neighbourhoods, subsidies for basic foodstuffs, programmes of substituting slum huts for houses, the widespread availability of micro-credits... As a result of these and many others, between 1999 and 2005 severe poverty was reduced from 42,8% to 33,9%¹.

These programmes are largely financed through oil money, which has finally started to slowly trickle down to the poor especially after the "nationalisation" of the oil industry. I say "nationalisation" but in reality I am talking about mixed business ventures with multinationals, of which the government has a slightly larger cut. Both parties are satisfied with the deal. The multinationals are guaranteed profits, albeit smaller than before, whilst Chavez can claim that now the oil belongs to the people. These manoeuvres are just one example illustrating the centrality of populism above real results. After all, as *Business Week* points out, Chavez is "not so bad for business."²

Redistributing the profits from Venezuela's vast natural resources and taking advantage of the latest boom in oil prices has a great potential. Under Chavez however, despite all the grandiloquent speeches, this potential is not being fully realized. Why? Mismanagement and corruption are rampant at all levels. Venezuela is one of the poorest performers in Latin America in all corruption indices and is way down at #138 in the 2006 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index together with Niger, one point under Ethiopia and one point above Sierra Leone. I find it hard to believe that corruption is revolutionary. With 500 billion dollars of petrol income, general public hospitals are in a precarious state whilst military spending has skyrocketed. Even though Chavez has displaced the traditional crooked elites from power, a new class is starting to settle in at the top, what some people are already starting to call the *Boli-bourgeoisie*.

The issue of democracy

Despite leading a failed coup in 1992, Chavez has won a succession of democratic elections since 1998. Attempting to close the divide between the rich and the poor is also a democratic

¹ Poverty Rates in Venezuela. Getting the Numbers Right, Center for Economic and Policy Research, Washington DC, May 2006.

² Dossier "Chavez, not so bad for business", *Business Week*, New York, 21/06/2007

plus (a notion that is unfortunately being forgotten in the West). In spite of the international media distortions, no TV channel has been closed. RCTV, a TV station linked to the 2002 coup, has not had its license renewed to broadcast through the limited number of public wavelengths, it is however fully functional through cable TV (the complexity of the issue deserves a separate article). Much of Venezuela's media; newspapers, radios and TV channels (only 1 channel on free, public wavelengths though) continue to have a critical stance against Chavez.

The government has also embarked on various projects to increase citizen's participation in state decisions. For example, the Communal Councils, which are democratic neighbourhood community organizations that can administer public funds to improve services, infrastructure and cultural spaces in their local areas. Also, by collecting the signatures of 20% of the number of people who voted in the last election you can trigger a referendum on whether or not to recall the president.

These policies however, are often contradicted by contravening policy tendencies. The increased strength and importance of the presidency undermines the idea of the participatory policies. For example, the Communal Councils funds are handed out from government institutions whose directors are handpicked by Chavez. Consequently, these Councils, which are meant to be part of civil society, become dependent on and conditioned by a paternal state. Chavez often uses the ideas of the iconic Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci to explain his policies. Conversely though, Gramsci's ideas about civil society absorbing the state seem to have been inverted by Chavez to be about civil society being absorbed by the state! The idea of the recall referendum has also suffered a blow. It so happens that one of Chavez's ministers got a hold of the list of people that had signed for the recall referendum that took place in 2004. What are the now the famous "Tascón Lists", were placed on a website for all to see, violating the right of secrecy. Moreover, the list has been used, amongst other things, to obstruct the signatories from accessing jobs as civil servants.

The lack of pluralism on the left

The "you are either with me or against me" paradigm has been imposed. What started as a coalition of progressive military men and left-wing parties is now being united in a single party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, under the nascent personality cult of Chavez. Dissidence and criticism from other sectors of the left has been discredited and dismissed as treason or sell-out to the oligarchs. For example, the Anarchist and Libertarian Socialist groups in Venezuela have been accused of complicity with the C.I.A! Consequently, healthy debate and the circulation of different ideas and opinions has been severely damaged. This phenomenon is largely a result of the polarization in the Venezuelan political scene. It is a reaction to the intense criticism and attack by the Venezuelan elites and multinational companies that culminated in economic sabotage and an attempted coup in 2002. However, there is no justification for this persistent, closed and authoritarian stance.

Although most of Chavez's supporters come from the poor, by no means is he the "leader" of the working classes. The purpose of the state in the last instance is to protect a status-quo accorded in the upper echelons of the political pyramid. It will always be a step behind grassroots social and working-class movements, no matter what its representatives claim. For example, sticking to the available statistics, from the 1st of July to the 30th of November of 2006, 26

demonstrations were obstructed and repressed. 71 cases of injuries from beatings, asphyxiation, rubber bullets or live ammunition were consequently reported. These included demonstrations of miners of El Callao against the Chinese multinational company Jin Yan, citizens protesting because of the lack of drinkable water in a neighbourhood of the city of Barinas, the eviction of a hundred poor peasant families that had squatted land in a new neighbourhood called *Bolivarian Paradise* in Guanare,³ etc. In the words of the anarchist thinker Mikhail Bakunin, “when the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called “the People’s Stick.””

What then?

Despite the issues raised above, current events in Venezuela should not be dismissed or ignored. For the first time, Venezuelan peasants and working-classes are becoming actively involved in the public and political life they were traditionally apathetic towards and marginalized from. Consciousness about the illegitimacy of capitalism’s unequal property relations and class system is growing and being acted upon. However, going around shouting “Viva La Revolución!” without knowing the facts, is a mistake. History has taught us that when politicians claim to be in favour of socialism it does not mean they are necessarily pursuing socialist policies. Instead, we should stay informed and keep a critical outlook. We should be against US imperialist involvement and the Venezuelan elites undemocratic tendencies. We should applaud positive social reforms and support those that are attempting to democratise the participatory mechanisms that have been put in place. We should also show solidarity to left wing and democratic dissidents that are challenging the revolution’s greatest enemy within. That is no-more than the bureaucratic and autocratic instincts of the Bolivarian political class and Chavez himself.

³ Uzcátegui, Rafael, “Repression against popular protests increases in 2006”, *El Libertario* #49, February-March 07.

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