

Venezuela 2006: Continued repression of popular protest

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From July 1 to November 30 there were 26 demonstrations repressed, impeded or otherwise hampered by the state's security organs; a greater number than the 18 cases accounted for in the report by the NGO PROVEA for the whole of 2005 (www.derechos.org.ve). This study likewise shows an increase in the number of violations to the right of physical integrity denouncing at least 71 injuries by bullets, bb's, blows, choking and other mistreatment, compared to 49 cases in 2005. In the same vein, cases of violations of the right to personal liberty show an increase of 60% with 130 arbitrary detentions versus 81 for the 12 months of 2005. In 55% of the cases, the repression was at the hands of regional police while 45% were committed by the National Guard (NG). Only 6 cases, 23% of the total, took place in the city of Caracas.

The latest Annual Report on the human rights situation in Venezuela also made by Provea estimates that between October 2005 and September 2006 58 demonstrations were repressed in the country. If we add to this the 16 protests violently dissolved between October and November, the number climbs to 74 cases. Two students, Jose Gonzalez (Cumana) and Dave Parker (Trujillo) died this year as a result of the police's repressive actions. These numbers are in contrast to the official declarations that affirm that the repression of protests is a thing of the past. "This is not a government that tramples, that assassinates, tortures or represses anyone. That happened during the Fourth Republic, President Chavez's government does not have its hands stained with Venezuelan blood" said Vice-President Jose Vicente Rangel this past December 11 referring to the numbers published by the NGO's.

This tendency shows a slow, progressive and sui generis radicalization of popular protest, particularly those related to the right to shelter and public services, and to a lesser extent the demand for worker's rights. These expressions fall within a context and have some characteristics that make them different from similar others happening in the continent: any rapprochement to our reality that's neither propaganda nor mystifying, must take into account both the history and the cultural subjectivity of the country during the 20th century.

Us vs. them: the logic of polarization

The high expectations created by the nation's executive and their scant materialization, with the exception of the Missions' assistance programs, start to wear out the charismatic domination represented by Hugo Chavez, in spite of the seven million votes that made his re-election possible. His first presidential period was characterized by, among other factors, a strong political polarization that created the favorable conditions for subordinating grassroots dynamics to the ballot. This unconditional loyalty has taken hold because the continuous reiteration of the binary logic: a revolutionary, patriotic and Bolivarian "us" perceived as the good guys; versus the adversary, the imperialist, counterrevolutionary and traitor "other" seen as the bad guys. Any opposition is interpreted as manipulation by the foreign enemy (imperialism) whose hypothetical confrontation demands the permanent reiteration of unity and loyalty. This reasoning prevents and subordinates not only the dialogue with the "other" but also regulates the interchange among "us" by subjecting it to the will of the leader. A clear example is the debate about the building of the so-called "only party".

The executive's rhetoric has capitalized on the resentment against the distribution of wealth and power during the first forty years of the country's democracy. Actions on the strong will for change generated during the 80's and 90's have availed on the high oil prices and an aggres-

sive fiscal policy that have allowed the government a sustained period of huge income, one of the highest in Venezuela's history. Because of that, the timid advances in social matters do not correspond with the economic windfall which permeates the popular sectors while continuing to further enrich the wealthy globalized elites. As time goes by, love, even its Bolivarian kind, cannot endure on empty promises.

Up to now the popular protests have developed certain characteristics. They have been made in large part by actors formed under the influence of the "Process" and without previous political experience – this is due in part to the substitution and co-optation of the social fabric prior to 1998. As explained by Max Weber, charismatic domination means that the presidential figure embodies magic-religious attributes, and historical predestination. Governmental contradictions and shortcomings, therefore, are attributed to the mundane limitations of its functionaries. The demonstrators mobilize against ministers, mayors, governors and police and military agents, but, for now, not against the presidential figure. On the other hand, and to set them apart from the "other" protest, they claim in different ways their identity as "us".

Along with the country's centralization, the majority of the protests have happened in places other than Caracas, a city where the budget trickle down is greater and has greater accessibility. The executive knows that a demonstration in the capital, whatever its size, is exponentially more visible than if it happened in the provinces, which also explains their efforts to diminish them.

The retaining walls

During the first governmental period the cooptation and neutralization of protest was made possible due to a number of reasons. First, the high expectations created at Miraflores. Second, the imposition of polarization and the reduction of social conflicts to the electoral farce thus imposing self censorship upon expressions of discontent. Third, the idea of an external enemy and its hypothetical and imminent armed aggression. Fourth, the neutralization and bureaucratization of grass roots leaders. Fifth, the creation of a whole gamut of institutional channels to control participation and demands. And sixth, the progressive delegation of police and surveillance functions to the citizenry under the guise of "social intelligence" and "civil-military alliance".

The interaction of these elements means that in order to manifest itself, protest must pass a series of roadblocks and, only as a last resort, neutralization by the use of the state's security apparatus becomes necessary. About the latter we must remember that the "Bolivarian revolution" didn't substantially change any of its armed components, its structure or the traditional paradigms of control of citizen's protest. If, during its first years in power, the government could show very small numbers of detentions and injuries in popular demonstrations, it is simply because they didn't exist, and not because the police had assumed different strategies for the resolution of conflict than in the past. After eight years in power the government instituted a National Commission for Police Reform (Conarepol in Spanish) to perform a diagnosis and issue recommendations, with doubts about its effective implementation on the part of its promoters.

Some of the conflicts – demonstrations against carbon exploitation in Zulia, mobilizations of street vendors in Caracas in October and the recent occupation of the Guiria International Port – show that the greater part of the neutralization work has been done not by the police but by sectors of the "us". On 10/18/06 the street vendors of the capital called a demonstration to demand not the 10 million votes for Chavez but for an agenda of demands decided upon by themselves: the

building of the promised commercial centers for street vendors, their inclusion in Social Security and the Communal Councils, as well as a pension for retirement. The demonstrators declared that the march was for worker's rights, and to avoid the electoral theme –although at times they did chant slogans in favor of the president – they wore grey shirts with the area where each works stamped on the back. The march passed calmly through the city center and ended under the rain with a rally at Avenida Urdaneta. 24 hours before the center of the city was blanketed by flyers, rich in expletives, accusing the demonstration of being an opposition protest in camouflage. The day of the march, the official newspaper VEA suggested the presence of dark interests behind the street vendors: "Groups of agitators would take aim at the informal workers that toil in the streets and avenues of Caracas". According to the paper "supposed paramilitaries would finance the street vendors at strategic locations of the Republic's capital to develop a plan to destabilize the democratic institutions". At the end of the march, the street vendors faced people identified as members of the official party Popular Union of Venezuela (UPV) who accused them of being "right wing infiltrators". During the day the National Guard and the Metropolitan police only blocked access to the Palace of Government.

At other times, demonstrations are explicitly postponed by "voices" of the social movements in accordance with the political agenda imposed from above. At the November monthly assembly of the Community Housing Organization and homeless groups that takes place at the Foro Libertador de Caracas, they were repeatedly asking from the dais that any protest be postponed until after the elections.

Upward solidarity

Another characteristic of the mobilizations as well as of the social actors that carry them out is that vertical solidarity towards the charismatic leader supplants horizontal comradeship links and solidarity among equals. This complicates an understanding of these initiatives as social movements are traditionally understood: collective initiatives with a shared identity, discourse and objectives, with the ability to react to aggression against one of its parts. 36 homeless people were prosecuted in 2006 for crimes described in the Penal Code as trespassing and resisting authority. Some of them are, as of the time of this writing, still deprived of liberty. There have been no emails, demonstrations nor petitions for their release, neither from these homeless groups nor from other social organizations.

There also seems to be a lack of intra-class solidarity in initiatives explicitly more "revolutionary". This past October 23 Jose Miguel Rojas Espinosa was arrested, presumably after placing a low intensity detonator near the US embassy in Caracas. Three weeks later, in Maracaibo, Teodoro Rafael Darnott, aka "Commander Teodoro" is arrested, accused of being the mastermind. According to a web page in MSN groups, both belong to the Wayuu Islamic Autonomy organization, self-proclaimed founder of Hezbollah Latin America. The action was part of a Jihad called against the US for their belligerence towards Iraq and Iran. There are no graffiti to remind us, no flyers justifying them or asking for their freedom. In the champion country against the US, imprisoned anti-imperialists don't have anyone writing to them.

The poor against the poor

Several analysts agree that there will be an increase in social conflicts in 2007. With decreasing electoral activity, with the expectations still there and with promises doubled, an increase in mobilizations for housing, services and jobs is conceivable. If we also take into account the predictable increase in internal conflicts between the party of Chavez, facing the homogenization of the “one party” and the build up of indulgences to the charismatic leader, president Chavez’s second presidential period would face social convulsions different from those during his first period, owing to the social debt maintained and deepened by the previous government –the very same- and its inability to reform –not even revolutionize- people’s every day experience. Oscar Schemel, sociologist in the employ of Hinterlaces Company, and whose predictions about the elections were totally on target, recapped this possible scenario as “the poor against the poor”. But the turbulence may last as long as the ability of the president to keep his kingdom out of this world and to keep inconformity in struggle with the underlings’ imperfect earthy world.

The facts

November

11/21/06

The inhabitants of La Yaguara, located in the Libertador County of the state of Carabobo blockaded the Valencia – Campo Carabobo highway in both directions, protesting the lack of public services. The Valencia SWAT police dispersed the demonstration using tear gas and plastic bullets and arrested one person. The same day, in Caracas, the National Guard attacked people in front of the Banco Nacional de Vivienda y Habitat arresting several people.

11/9/06

The State of Bolivar police dissolved a demonstration in Guayana City by workers of the Corporacion Venezolana de Guayana (CVG) using tear gas, bb’s and fire arms. There were six arrests and six injured.

11/8/06

Between 10 and 25 people from the OCV La Guzmanera were injured when the Aragua police blocked the way for a demonstration that attempted to go to Caracas to ask for help building homes.

11/1/06

28 adolescents and 11 adults were arrested in San Felix, state of Bolivar, when they protested outside the Banco del Libro demanding basic services and incorporation into Mision Sucre.

October

10/30/06

20 people were arrested when a group of unemployed workers tried to enter the Puerto La Cruz refinery to put pressure to receive the promised jobs. During the action the National Guard used tear gas and blunt machetes.

10/24/06

Approximately 40 people were arrested in Coloncito, state of Tachira in the fourth day of protests for lack of public services.

10/23/06

Four demonstrators were arrested and others suffered asphyxiation when the NG dispersed a demonstration with tear gas and bb's at the Caracas- Guarena highway. 100 people had blocked the road to demand repairs in their homes after the recent rains. The same day, 12 people were injured and 30 arrested in Coloncito, state of Tachira when the NG repressed a protest for lack of water and public services.

10/20/06

The taking of the Barinas – San Cristobal highway left four demonstrators injured by the Barinas police. The inhabitants were protesting the lack of electrical service and potable water.

10/19/06

Two people were hurt by gunshots and six more by bb's when a group of traditional fishermen protested at the Guiria International Port demanding that the port be converted to a collective subsidized by the state.

10/14/06

The Carabobo state police dispersed a demonstration with tear gas when employees of the health sector demonstrated for their worker's rights.

10/13/06

Two people were shot in their feet when the neighbors of the Jacinto Lara district in Barquisimeto asked for the construction of a bridge. The Lara police and the NG used tear gas and bb's to disperse hundreds of demonstrators.

10/12/06

Caroni county patrols fired shots in the air to disperse street vendors that were protesting the eviction of an artisan's fair in Puerto Ordaz.

10/10/06

Military troops occupied the village of Coloncito, state of Tachira after a patrol car was set on fire and some buildings were damaged by a population protesting abuses by the Tachira police.

10/4/06

The Rapid Response Team of Poli-Anzoategui dispersed a demonstration by neighbors of the Punto Lindo community, San Juan Capistrano County, Boca de Uchire with tear gas and bb's.

September

9/16/06

Barinas state police arrested three people belonging to a group of 600 families that were protesting the lack of potable water in the Agustin Codazzi urbanization in the city of Barinas. Several others were injured by bb's and blows.

9/11/06

One person was arrested by the Aragua police when a group of families of El Campito, La Cabrera in Maracay protested the broken promises of housing.

August

8/17/06

A hundred peasant families were evicted in Guanare by the Portuguesa state police after squatting on land in the Paraiso Bolivariano neighborhood. The forced eviction left several people injured, among them a pregnant woman.

8/16/06

A demonstration at a parking lot at the Valencia City Hall ended with two council members and three police injured when two groups were protesting the lack of garbage pick up and the lack of parking spaces.

8/14/06

Victims from the Las Casitas de Guatire, state of Miranda who were protesting in front of the headquarters of the Banco Nacional de la Vivienda were dispersed with tear gas by the NG, arresting alleged protest leader Vilma Macias.

8/10/06

Two workers affiliated with UNT were hurt in a protest in front of the labor tribunal in Maracay. That day, a group of 500 neighbors of Catia la Mar blocked the street demanding plumbing repairs. There were two injured by bb's after the police acted.

8/9/06

Five people were arrested by the NG during an eviction in Ojo de Agua in Baruta. Twenty small children were affected by tear gas. Three days later 11 people were arrested for "trespassing and resisting authority". That day two people were arrested when a group of 200 demonstrating for housing attempted to mobilize from Miraflores to the media.

July

7/28/06

A group of miners from El Callao tried to demonstrate against the Chinese transnational Jin Yan when one of the union leaders was arrested by the NG. The workers denounced the use of blunt machetes and tear gas by the police.

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