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Venezuela

When two worlds collide

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When Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela in 1998, he took over the reins of a deeply depoliticized country, seriously infected with corruption and clientelism. The 'democracy' installed in 1958 had been confiscated by the élites of the political parties allied to corrupt networks. Chavez was elected more on the basis of rejection of this old system than on a solid political project based on organised social forces on whose support he could rely.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/28chavez.jpg>]

Let us say from the beginning that what has happened in Venezuela under Chavez does not amount to a socialist revolution. However, if we understand by 'revolution' a radical change in political mentality and its organisation, a massive growth of understanding that the regime belongs to the people, then a revolution is underway. If one understands by 'revolution' a long process which is born before it is concretely realized, the Venezuelan revolution began in the 1950s against the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jimenez and is now at the gates of power with Hugo Chavez as spokesperson. To take up an idea frequently invoked by its partisans, the 'Bolivarian revolution' resembles a kind of French revolution, an indispensable stage in the preparation of more radical processes in the future.

An anti-communist pact

Analysts have often presented Venezuela's contemporary history as an exception in Latin America - a country which has succeeded in establishing a representative and liberal democracy while the rest of the continent was subject to political instability, military dictatorships and the development of guerrilla movements. The reality is much more complex.

Representative democracy in Venezuela was born on January 23, 1958 with the overthrow of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez following a popular insurrection accompanied by a military uprising. On the civilian side, the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) was the most active party in the insurrection; it led the Patriotic Junta - the alliance of all the parties opposed to the dictatorship (Acción Democrática, COPEI, the URD and the PCV). [1]

Some historians say that the privileged classes of the time, allied to the US, supported the overthrow of the dictatorship, which did not respond any more to their interests. At this time Venezuela was the most significant country on the planet in terms of oil.

It was the main supplier of oil and materials necessary to the military deployment of US forces in Europe during the Second World War. The entire oil industry was controlled by western companies, particularly the British ones. The fall of the dictatorship led to a new political regime which was definitively put in place with the election of Romulo Betancourt, leader of the AD in exile. The PCV supported the candidacy of Wolfgang Larrazabal which ensured the interim presidency between January 23, 1958 and the election of Betancourt in January 1959. The new regime, which adopted a Constitution in 1961, was sealed during 1958 by an alliance between the three main parties (AD, COPEI, URD). This alliance decided to marginalize the PCV, through the Pact of Punto Fijo. This was a kind of agreement of co-government between the three parties who, under the pretext of protecting the nascent democracy, decided to share power whatever the electoral results. Parallel to this, the main trade union federation, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV), led by AD and responding directly to its interests, signed an agreement with the employers on the maintenance of collective agreements originating from the dictatorship. The Pact of Punto

Fijo collapsed definitively with the victory of Chavez in 1998. of elements originating from popular sectors which is partly trained in the public universities and is thus open to Marxist and progressive thought.

Military work by the PCV

The first months of the new regime were marked by the demands of workers, students and the revolutionary left in general, including the PCV. Betancourt's victory in 1958 was rapidly seen as a betrayal. Elected on a left wing programme and personal image (he was a member of the CP in Costa Rica in the 1930s and participated in a left government between 1945 and 1948), he rapidly reconciled himself with the interests of the dominant classes, convinced that in 1959 no left government could face down US imperialism.

The Cuban revolution of January 1959 refuted this analysis in stinging fashion. It favoured the radicalization of left sectors inside the ruling party, AD and put the PCV back on the rails.

The repression of left sectors by the Betancourt government effectively obliged the revolutionary left to turn away from the road of legality. The PCV decided to turn to armed struggle, joined in 1961 by the MIR, a left split from AD led by its youth wing and influenced by revolutionary Marxism during the years of clandestinity.

Inside the PCV, a sector concerned itself with military work under the leadership of Douglas Bravo. This front attempted to overthrow the AD regime in 1962 through two military coup attempts organised by the PCV. The emergence of Chavez on the public scene on February 4, 1992 was the end result of this strategy of the left forces inside an army made up in its great majority

In this sense, one can speak of a revolutionary process which began in the late 1950s and which found in the election of Chavez a first small victory.

Hugo Chavez

Hugo Chavez, a young soldier undergoing training, joined the clandestine movement towards the end of the 1970s, influenced by his brother Adan Chavez, today in charge of agrarian reform in Venezuela, but then an activist in the Party of the Venezuelan Revolution (PRV).

The PRV originated from the guerrilla movement. In 1962 a National Liberation Front and Armed Forces of National Liberation had been set up under the influence of the CP. When, in 1965, the CP called on its militants to halt the armed struggle, Douglas Bravo refused. The NLF-AFNL became the FALN-PRV.

In 1969, the majority of combatants accepted the amnesty of President Caldera. The group around Douglas Bravo and Ali Rodriguez - currently director of the national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela S.A (PDVSA) - kept the PRV in guerrilla activity and resumed clandestine work inside the army.

We should note that the CP, the AFNL and then the PRV adopted an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist, cross-class political programme. According to the latter, the nationalist bourgeoisie had its place in the revolutionary regime to be created, a political position largely sustained by Chavez. In the Venezuela of the 21st century, the Chavista majority thinks like the guerrilla movement of the 1960s, which is not a small political conquest.

Inside the armed forces, Hugo Chavez developed what would become the MBR- 200 (Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement) which would lead the civilian-military insurrection of February 4, 1992. More known as a coup d'État, this insurrection was the response of the MBR-200 to the repression of the popular riots of February 27, 1989 (the Caracazo), a spontaneous movement of Venezuela's excluded masses against a package of neoliberal measures implemented by Carlos Andres Perez, a Latin American supporter of the Socialist International. The forces of order would leave 3,000 dead in the streets.

Unknown, Chavez then entered on the public scene through the attempted coup of February 4, 1992. Naturally, the sectors of the traditional left, unfamiliar with political work inside the armed forces, mistrusted the putschist colonel. Apart from the PRV, reduced then to a groupuscule, two other parties of the radical left had developed their own apparatus inside the armed forces - La Causa Radical [2] and Bandera Roja. [3] The popular masses, for their part, saw immediately in Chavez a possibility of getting rid of a regime which was hated because of its neoliberal policies and corruption (a minority of the country lived according to US living standards while the huge majority was immensely deprived).

From 1958 to 1993, every president came from either the AD or COPEI. The presidential election of 1993 saw the breakdown of this model and the emergence at a mass level of La Causa Radical, a heterodox Marxist party which developed particularly in the class struggle trades unionism in the east of the country. During the election of 1993 its candidate, Andres Velázquez was on the point of becoming president. Massive fraud stole the election from him. A minority of the party demanded it call street demonstrations to demand his victory. The majority refused, sowing the seeds of the division of 1997 which led to the creation of the Patria Para Todos (PPT) party, today the second key party in the Chavista majority.

During Chavez's clandestine work in the army, some contacts had taken place between the colonel and La Causa Radical, without any agreement emerging. During the presidential election of 1993, Chavez called for active abstention, arousing a fierce hatred on the part of La Causa Radical towards him. Its candidate Andres Velázquez is today in the opposition and did not hesitate to give his support to the military putschists in April 2002.

When participating in the presidential election of 1998, Chavez announced that it amounted to a 'tactical movement'. In the framework of representative democracy, to consider an election as a tactic is to avow the revolutionary character of one's objectives; to come to power by the ballot box to so as to install a revolutionary process from a position as legitimate head of state.

A political revolution

Chavez would successively win several electoral processes. The first was in December 1998, against nearly all the established parties. The PPT decided to support Chavez, under the pressure of the rank and file and against the will of its main leader of the time, Pablo Medina. [4] The Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), pillar of the last right wing government of Caldera (1993- 1998), supported him also, [5] provoking the departure of its main leaders. All the other political forces were opposed. He nonetheless won the election with 55% of the vote.

His great political project was to bring about constitutional reform, under the slogan "All power to the people". To achieve this, he called a referendum to set up a Constituent Assembly. In the elections for this Assembly his supporters obtained 90% of the seats. The new Constitution was written in less than a year and approved by a majority of the electoral body, before the renewal of all electoral mandates in August 2000. Chavez then obtained more votes than during the election of December 1998.

In many areas, the new 'Bolivarian Constitution' of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela contains authentically innovatory measures. The concept of the state of law is replaced by that of the state of Law and Justice, and the concept of participatory democracy is introduced.

Deputies became subject to removal. [6] The concept of the workers' cooperative was introduced, as well as the principle of self-management. The rights of indigenous peoples were recognised, including rights of land ownership, managed according to the ancestral traditions of the pre- Columbian peoples. The Constitution was feminized. The principle of defence of the environment is invoked in numerous constitutional clauses. The patenting of living organisms is forbidden, as are monopolies. Oil, as a raw material, is excluded from the field of possibilities of privatisation. The presence of foreign troops on the territory is forbidden. The principle of solidarity and Latin American integration has a prominent place.

Other elements indicate that the negotiations in the bloc which had come to power had led to concessions to the right; the principle of a decentralized police force originating from the old system was maintained. [7]

Abortion, after a sharp debate, was rejected despite Chavez's position in favour (repeated publicly in April 2003). Non-discrimination because of sexual orientation was not introduced in the discussion but Chavez has recently defended gay rights. Free enterprise was kept as a constitutional principle, as was private property in the means of production. The Constitution is thus clearly situated within the framework of a capitalist regime. These examples among others show that Chavez's party included authentic reactionaries in its early period in power. [8]

Strewn with obstacles to a genuine social revolution, the Constitution is nonetheless a precious tool for the popular movement in the conquest of semi-direct or participatory democracy. That is the real innovation of the 'Bolivarian revolution'.

A society in movement

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Some thousands of Bolivarian circles, popular assemblies, trade unions of struggle, assemblies of women, students, committees for urban or agricultural land, dozens of rank and file political regroupments, make today's Venezuela a society in movement. All these associations benefit from the frank and massive support of the chief of state, who sees in them the genuine process of consciousness raising necessary for the transformation of the country. Thus, for example, it is with the support of the chief of state that the community mobilizes to defend its school system against a political decision to close it down. [9] It is with the support of the minister of higher education that student assemblies are held in favour of opening up the public university to the popular classes. The National Institute of Women has developed thousands of 'meeting points' throughout the country to help women react to domestic or work-related violence, informing them of their rights, organising them to acquire others. The same institute organises women to gain access to public credit, allowing them to become autonomous economic actors, even if the activities proposed reproduce a form of sexual division of labour. Numerous new trade unions have appeared outside of the CTV federation, which is linked to the opposition. These unions decided early this year to form a new confederation, the UNT. [10]

Caracas is a city of around 4 million inhabitants. A large part of its population lives in the 'barrios' (the equivalent of the favelas in Brazil). Initially shanty towns, the barrios have over time been transformed into real neighbourhoods, where the inhabitants build their houses on occupied land, without ownership rights. In these neighbourhoods, strongholds of Chavismo, the inhabitants self-organise, following the advice of the president: "Organise yourselves, we will bring you the political and economic support". Thus popular assemblies have been created, reinforced by a

new institution: the local councils for popular planning.

Here we have one of the most interesting subtleties of the Bolivarian revolution: the head of the state is the main promoter of the subversion of the state by popular organization. Faced with a highly bureaucratized state, Hugo Chavez has appealed to his compatriots to manage directly themselves the affairs of their neighbourhoods, and promote workers' control of the enterprises. This impressive political upheaval has not, however, led to a genuine transformation of Venezuelan society.

No deep-seated structural transformation

Unlike the Cuban revolution which, in less than three years, had eliminated illiteracy, reduced rents by half, nationalized electricity and implemented agrarian reform, the Bolivarian revolution has not yet implemented great structural reforms. However, unlike the Castroite revolution, Chavismo has not suppressed any newspapers, banned parties, or arrested any political prisoners. So in neither sense can the Bolivarian revolution be assimilated to some kind of 'Cubanization'.

Nonetheless, great structural reforms are necessary if the people are not to lose confidence in the possibilities of this government. A great plan for feeding the people needs to be developed on the basis of the timid beginnings of recent months. [11] Public health is in a state of advanced decay. However, the reform of national education has begun with the opening of the Bolivarian schools, which assure pupils food and complete days of teaching.

However, it would be wrong to pin the entire responsibility for these shortcomings on the government alone. The big difficulty which the government faces is an absence of control over great parts of the state apparatus. This bureaucratic reality is explained by Venezuela's model of development in the second half of the 20th century. Venezuela has lived for 40 years on its oil income, which represents 50% of its tax receipts and 80% of its exports. 70% of its food needs are imported. The country's economic model is based on the export of its crude oil, and money has never been invested in the industrialization of the country. One can say that Venezuela is not, properly speaking, a capitalist country led by a national bourgeoisie. There is not properly so-called a working class dependent on an employing class. 50% of workers are employed in the informal sector, the biggest formal employer is the state, and jobs in this sector follow the clientelist model of the former regime. Each minister or director of services employs their friends without dismissing others, and membership of political parties is organized around this clientelist basis. To give an example, the press and communications service of the Libertador ward in Caracas has 54 employees! The private enterprises that exist have been created thanks to initial support from the state and those who have become owners of these enterprises have never understood what the word tax means.

Absence of a strategic project

There is not in Venezuela a party of the working class worthy of this name in the manner of the Workers' Party (PT) of Brazil. Chavez came to power without an apparatus and without strategic perspective. He is also the product of the enormous mistrust felt by Venezuelans for the party form. Indeed, a structured party which provides the government with clear orientations starting from the needs of the popular movement is cruelly lacking. The absence of a strategic project of transformation produces a discourse which hesitates between the necessity of the construction of a national capitalism (indeed sometimes of a capitalist class) to favour endogenous development and the development of productive forces or the aspiration to co-management or indeed self-management.

Despite his revolutionary origins, Hugo Chavez lacks political education. That has led him to place confidence in people who, like Alfredo Pena and Luis Miquilena, to cite just a couple, have become prime adversaries well integrated into the state apparatus. At the same time, the political and social forces which are found today around Chavez are clearly to the left of those who supported him in 1998.

Faced with a media in the hands of an irrational opposition, the popular movement has developed a law on radio and television content which is being discussed in parliament. Although timid, this law is a sign that the government has decided to no longer give a free hand to the manipulation of information. The new trade union federation, the UNT, is clearly situated on the terrain of the class struggle against the tradition of class collaboration prevalent in Venezuela since 1958. After the defeat of the employers' strike in the oil sector, the government has taken control of the oil industry.

It must now take control of the justice system and the electoral council so as to weed out those deputies and governors who, having been elected as Chavez supporters, have gone over to the opposition.

The political process underway in Venezuela is novel and raises questions about our own political traditions. The seizure of central power is not enough to bring about the necessary transformations for sharing out the national wealth. Venezuela teaches us that the distribution of power can be an alternative to the bureaucratic obstacles in the framework of a process of transformations which passes strictly through the legal framework. The political project is not revolutionary and yet the dominant classes do not accept the popular vote. The holders of economic and political power would do everything to block the reforms undertaken by Chavez. Venezuela poses the question central to all revolutionary processes - can the interests of the dominant classes be frontally attacked in the framework of a 'democratic and peaceful revolution'? In Venezuela, because of the particular history of the revolutionary movement, the army is apparently under the control of the government.

Will this be enough to avoid a non-democratic outcome?

What outcome?

The opposition, dismembered and divided as it is currently, has not laid down its arms. It has a constitutional focus; Chavez will reach his half term on August 19, 2003, and from this date the opposition can gather signatures to submit his revocation to referendum. For more than a year, the opposition has claimed that the immense majority of the country wishes the departure of Chavez. If the revocation of the mandate of Chavez happens, however, nothing indicates that he cannot run again in a new presidential election. That being the case, Chavismo would only have one candidate, Chavez.

How many candidates would represent the opposition? Even if there were only two, that would be enough for Chavez to win the election. And if Chavez's mandate is not revoked, nothing in the attitude of the opposition indicates that it would not seek an extra-constitutional outcome to its desire to displace the government.

The Bolivarian revolution is a necessary transitional stage which can open the road to a revolution led by the oppressed sectors of Venezuelan society. For that to happen, the organisation of networks of political and trade union solidarity is necessary.

[1] AD (Democratic Action) is a left populist party, affiliated to the Socialist International. COPEI (Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization) is Christian Democratic. The URD (Democratic Republican Union), insignificant today, was a left nationalist party. The Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) benefited from a significant strategic and political autonomy in relation to Moscow, supporting a class collaborationist policy in relation to imperialism.

[2] La Causa Radical was created in 1971, originating from a sector of the PCV which, conscious of the defeat of the guerrillas and opposed to a social democratic orientation, decided to invest its forces in trade unionism in the iron and steel industry. Heterodox Marxist in orientation, La Causa Radical came close to winning the presidential elections in 1993.

[3] Bandera Roja is a split from the MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, a revolutionary Marxist split from the AD in 1961) which rejected the pacification at the beginning of the 1970s and maintains a small military apparatus. While it took a pro Albanian orientation in the 1980s, it is currently a member of the opposition and is considered as the armed wing of the coordination dominated by the forces of the right.

[4] The case of Pablo Medina is symptomatic of the division of the left in relation to Chavez. A leader of La Causa Radical and a revolutionary Marxist, he was secretary of the PPT and was one of the leading figures of the movement against the payment of the debt in Venezuela. He participated actively in the drawing up of the new constitution. He has written a book, *Rebeliones*, in which he claims a role of the first order in Chavez's coming to power, despite his refusal to support him in the 1998 election. While in the leadership of the PPT, he sought to break it from Chavez, but this was rejected by the organization's congress. He left the PPT alone. His entire family remain members of the PPT leadership. He rallied to the opposition in early 2002 and was one of the April putschists. He is now a member of the Democratic Coordination, a cartel of organizations supporting the overthrow at all costs of the 'Castrocommunist regime of Chavez' and above all made up of sectors of the right.

[5] Since 2002, the majority of the MAS leadership has gone over to the opposition. Those who have refused are grouped in a new party, PODEMOS. Its first mass activity in April 2003 attracted 25,000 people at the lowest estimates.

[6] Articles 72 and following envisage the possibility of revoking all electoral mandates, but also of abrogating a law or a treaty, proposing a law or organising a consultative referendum on any significant question. For electoral mandates, revocation can take place from midterm onwards. Supporters of a referendum need to collect the signatures of the 20% of the electorate. In order for the mandate to be revoked votes for revocation should be superior to the number of votes obtained by the deputy. Chavez will arrive at his mid-term on August 19, the date at which the opposition can introduce its signatures to the National Electoral Council (CNE).

[7] The most illustrative case is that of Alfredo Pena. A member of the constituent assembly for Chavez's MVR, he was a fierce defender of the maintenance of a decentralized police force. Elected mayor of Caracas with the support of Chavez, he quickly became his main opponent and put the Caracas police at the disposal of the putschists of April 2002.

[8] An example is Luis Miquilena. A great influence on Chavez, organiser of the MVR, president of the Constituent Assembly, he was responsible for the nomination of the members of the Superior Tribunal of Justice. Swept from power by Chavez, he supported a coup. The Tribunal named by him decided in August 2002 that there was no coup in Venezuela, only a "power vacuum".

[9] During the lockout of December 2002-January 2003, the mayor of greater Caracas, Alfredo Pena, gave the order to close the schools.

[10] The UNT involves the biggest federations which have left the CTV. On May 1, the UNT contingent was probably more than 100,000 demonstrators.

[11] In April the first public food shop opened, the government plans to open low-price groceries and pharmacies in the popular neighbourhoods.