

Venezuela in the Firing Line of Threats to Democratic Stability in Latin America

Written by Renata Peixoto de Oliveira and Jefferson Pecori Viana

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RENATA PEIXOTO DE OLIVEIRA AND JEFFERSON PECORI VIANA, APR 7 2014

Threats to Latin American democracies are not far away, hidden in a past marked by the last dictatorial regimes from the 1960s to the 1980s, but still evident in recent political crises, as seen in Venezuela (2002), Bolivia (2008), Honduras (2009), Ecuador (2010), Paraguay (2012), and now in Venezuela again (2014).

Social mobilization and opposition activity are part of the democratic game, and recent experiences have put Latin America's democracies and political institutions to the test, but – despite discontentment – democratic institutions have survived. Some examples of successful responses to social demands are Argentina's recovery from chaos in 2001, Venezuela's overturn in 2002-2003, Bolivia (2008) and Ecuador's (2010) resolution of attempts at destabilization, and Chile (2011) and Brazil's (2013) strong institutions that protected their governments during social manifestations.

Important aspects to consider in an analysis of Latin America's political context include the U.S. Embassy's positions regarding left governments in Latin America, the obscure relations between opposition sectors and the Central Intelligence Agency or the State Department, and even the role of media groups. In the Venezuelan case, we consider a long historical process, the beginning of which can be identified in 1989 with the events known as *Caracazo*.

Historical Aspects of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

An understanding of Venezuela's current situation requires reflection on the changes that occurred in 1989 as a response to a failed representative regime, the illegitimacy of the traditional political parties that characterized the Punto Fijo era (1958-1998), and the economic liberalization policies ("El Paquetazo") during the second term of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989-1993). The failure of the antiquated political regime that created a "partidocracy" between the two hegemonic parties – Democratic Action and COPEI – as well as population resistance to the neoliberal package, created the ideal conditions to bring about the end of the bipartisan pact and the beginning of new political forces and actors. This explains the emergence of Hugo Chávez in the failed *coup d'état* of 1992 that attempted to overthrow the decadent and corrupt Pérez government, receiving massive population support in the process.

Years later, Chávez decided to gain power by pursuing democratic rules and participating in the electoral game, since, by that time, traditional parties and leaders did not reflect the demands of Venezuelan people. He successfully won a free-and-clear, democratic election in 1998, representing a genuine will for change by the excluded sector of Venezuelan society. His political platform initiated a left-governments wave all across Latin America, bringing a new political rhetoric of avoiding U.S. influence, rebuilding the state role in economy, restoring countries' sovereignty and autonomy, restructuring republics with popular participatory mechanisms, seeking alternatives to the neoliberal model, and rescuing traditional cultural heritage and Latin-American solidarity.

In the last 14 years, Venezuela held 18 elections, including five presidential elections. It is important to consider that Venezuela has a recall mechanism that allows the population to decide whether the president may finish a term. In

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Venezuela, there is not compulsory voting; instead, about 80% of the population went to the polls during the Chávez era, and six popular queries were held. Chavismo won all of them with a difference of 15% of the votes, with the exception of the plebiscite of 2007.

In addition to electoral developments, Venezuela under Chávez eradicated illiteracy, improved public medical services and other social indicators, and stimulated the public debate and popular participation. In addition to these social advances, Venezuela implemented universal access to education, a development fundamental for the emergence of new ways of thinking about colonized history and new societal goals to recover the collective memories of popular struggles past. Education is also an elementary factor for an effective relationship between society and state, as well as the emergence of a social consciousness based on national struggle (this is why Chávez adhered to Bolivarianism in a way that united national struggle with class and regional struggles).

These social advances characterized the social power that Chávez consolidated once he assumed the presidency, confronting traditional conceptions of ethnic homogeneity and political representation. Through social power, it was possible to realize the concept of plurinationalism and to confront the Westphalian order that corresponds to a reality different from that in Latin America. The social power of the Bolivarian Revolution has its roots in plurinational achievement, intercultural defense, and popular and participatory democracy. These elements are important to understand the resistance of destabilization, as well as the increase of the people's support,[1] regional support, and international support.

Foreign Relations and Support for Venezuelan Government

Chávez promoted and incentivized regional initiatives for cooperation and integration, such as UNASUL (Union of South American Nations), Mercosul (Southern Common Market), and ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – Peoples' Trade Treaty). It was important for his government's efforts to have an assertive, active, and critical position in many international forums and multilateral assemblies, establishing South-South cooperation and defending an international order characterized by multipolarity.

Building new mechanisms of integration based on solidarity, cooperation, autonomy, and achievement of *de facto* sovereignty, Venezuela received – in the face of attempts at destabilization – the support of regional governments and institutions. In addition to the creation of UNASUL and ALBA, Venezuela's government played an important role in the creation of CELAC (Community Latin American and Caribbean States). These new mechanisms of integration are fundamental to real, autonomous transformation.

The new principles that guided these mechanisms of integration find their roots in neosocialism, the so-called "Socialism of the 21st Century," and in the cooperative advantage fundamental to the ALBA initiative. Cuba, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua are the leading countries in the practical implementation of neosocialist programs; these countries strongly support the Venezuela government in current attempts at its destabilization. Thus, there is a new wave of international solidarity, in line with Che Guevara and José Martí's principles of internationalism and flying the flag of human dignity over capitalism.

The declarations of ALBA, UNASUL, Mercosul, and CELAC (according to the Ushuaia Agreement) regarding the respect of Venezuelan democratic institutions were fundamental to the guarantee of legality, much like the role played by the "Friends of Venezuela" in 2002 when opposing forces attempted a coup. In 2002, Venezuela did not have the same regional and institutional support that it currently has. So, in 2002, the fundamental forces that maintained Chávez's power were neither regional support nor the support of the people (despite the fact that there was support from poor classes), but the loyalty and trust of the army soldiers who were able to rescue the Chávez from jail.[2]

In short, the Chávez foreign program bet on South-South cooperation with the privilege of Latin American integration, recovered sovereignty and the capability to plan and act in an autonomous way, gained a new role in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries regarding oil prices, developed an energetic regional program through the creation of Petrocaribe, and opened diplomacy by hearing demands from social movements and

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institutionalizing its participation in the ALBA council.

Military Fidelity of Chavez's Legacy

It is fundamental to distinguish the important role of the Venezuelan military from its other Latin American counterparts. Chávez belonged to a military generation influenced by nationalism and class struggle ideologies. Beginning with Chávez's generation, most of Venezuela's military officers were not trained in the U.S. Army School of the Americas, but in the Venezuelan Military Academy. With the implementation of the Andrés Bello Plan, the Venezuelan Military Academy underwent a radical transformation that saw the teaching of political science classes and access to a large body of literature that included the strategies of Carl von Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, and Mao Zedong.

Additionally, the Venezuelan military became influenced by Bolivarian thought. Two remarkable influences came from Simón Bolívar's actions. First, that no military man should ever aim his weapon at the people. Second, he understood the importance of Latin American integration. The fact that there was no dictatorship and, consequentially, no guerrilla force in Venezuela caused its militaries to have a different perception of national reality. They did not face a guerrilla force or the communist "ghost" because these were not fundamental worries. They had no "red enemies" in the frontiers, but rather national poverty, rooted in the inequality of the political and economic system (in short, the behavior of an oligarchy and a bourgeois class that inevitably clashed with the lives of the national people). Another important factor is that there was no discrimination and no military caste in the Venezuelan armed forces and, because they had their own military academy, most Venezuelan soldiers were able to keep a class connection to their origins.

These factors coalesced in the social upheaval of February 27, 1989: the riot known as the *Caracazo* that ended with a huge massacre. It was important to create a new political awareness of the new military generation and the appearance of military leadership, above of all, in response to the inequality and social problems that resulted from the neoliberal programs applied by the Pérez government. This dissatisfaction and criticism became concrete on February 4, 1992, when Chávez led a military rebellion against President Perez. The rebellion was unsuccessful and Chávez assumed responsibility for the events, calling upon the insurgents to surrender, according to his famous declaration, "por ahora" ("for now"). From then on, Chávez gained the military's respect and loyalty that remained visible until after his death. Of course, now that loyalty is not to Chávez, but to his legacy, represented by president Nicolás Maduro.

Challenges

The Chavismo political ideology has some limitations and is in need of reinvention after 14 years of power. Despite some problems, it is not possible to deny the regime's democratic legitimacy, considering both sides of democratic regimes with a substantive, social, and participatory view or a representative, liberal one.

Venezuela's major democratic problem, over the last 14 years, has been a constant attempt to overthrow Chavismo from power: by using force and media during the coup of 2002; destabilizing the oil economy with the *Petróleos de Venezuela* strike of 2003; again using media opposition in 2007; and lately, with a huge destabilizing campaign incorporating international media conglomerates, U.S. government support, business sectors, upper and middle classes, and political forces that were jettisoned from power at the end of Punto Fijo Pact.

In spite of these destabilization attempts, the Venezuelan government has created initiatives that, to some degree, challenged U.S. hegemony in the world and, specifically, in Latin America. These initiatives include the exchange of Venezuelan international reserves from dollars to gold^[3] (about 64.8% of international reserves are in gold); the *sucre* currency, which implemented a "unified system of regional compensation" used by ALBA countries for trade and investment; the aforementioned principles of ALBA integration and Venezuela's membership in Mercosul; financial endeavors, like the Bank of the South, the ALBA Bank, and the growing of ALBA's international reserves; "grannational" companies, like Petrocaribe, that represent the shared interest and solidarity of governments in the face the neoliberal programs; and new agreements in petroleum interests with Russia, Iran, and China.

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To some degree, there is a foreign projection of internal Venezuelan transformations and of the popular and participation model of democracy – or, according to some thinkers, “the defense of democratic values of 21st century socialism.” This represents the challenge of how imperialism works and penetrates the Latin American region and, specifically, the internal institutions of Venezuelan society.

Chávez and his legacy pose a challenge for traditional imperialist powers because they do not follow the usual tendency for nationalist political movements to simply come to power; rather, they restructure that power. Especially after the 2002 coup attempt, Chávez began a program that does not reform, but changes both the appropriation of national surplus and of capitalist exploitation.

Through material transformations, diversification of bases of support (regional, domestic, and international), and changes to oppressed peoples’ mentality, Venezuela has acted as a formidable challenge to the international capitalist order, since its government is not limited to interstate system restrictions, but to the will of its people – the Latin American people.

Conclusion

In Venezuela, even if “the revolution will not be televised,”[4] antidemocratic attempts against the Bolivarian Revolution have been constantly broadcast and displayed worldwide.

Some of the major critics of Chavismo include the White House, the mainstream international media, and political leaders who represent the economic interests of the business sector and the upper middle class. There is nothing wrong with the right of every institution to express its own political opinion – as long as they pursue social justice, real plurality of ideas, and democratic values. The international media conglomerate, however, expresses only one point of view, and its concepts of plurality and freedom of expression only consider the opinion of conservative sectors, right and central-right parties, business groups, and U.S. geopolitical interests in Latin America.

Nobody is obliged to share and believe in these revolutionary or, if preferred, reformist policies and ideas, but one must respect the legitimacy of an ideology based on real social progress, freedom of expression, and fair elections. The Venezuelan middle and upper classes do not recognize social improvements in contemporary Venezuela and fear they will lose their historical privilege; the same occurred with oppositional parties that lost their hegemonic role in the Venezuelan party system.

Those who oppose President Maduro defend only their own economic interests and old political privileges. Twenty-five years after *Caracazo*, traditional parties and ancient political leadership could not reinvent themselves to respond to new societal demands and to pursue an authentic democratic path.

The elite’s resistance to Chavismo’s social progressive agenda obscures the real fact that it was not Chávez who jeopardized the opposition. Rather, it was the political elites who lost their control because the traditional political system did not reflect popular yearnings for economic prosperity, social justice, and democratic participation. Chávez did not just change Venezuela: his political prominence and ascension were possible because Venezuelan society clamored for change.

After Chávez’s death, President Maduro faces some dangerous and strong enemies. It is not possible to forecast the future in a scenario of uncertainty. Nevertheless, it is possible to assert that opposition leadership has covered its ears to the voices of Venezuelan people shouting for their right to be real Venezuelans, to prosper just as their country prospers from its oil profits.

[1] Some data indicates the reasons for popular support of the Chávez government and the current Maduro government: During the Chávez presidency, social expenditures increased 60.6% . The malnutrition rate fell from 21% in 1998 to less than 3% in 2012. Land reform has allowed tens of thousands of farmers to profit from the lands they own, redistributing more than three million hectares. In 1999, Venezuela was producing 51% of the food it consumed; in 2012, production was 71%, even though consumption of food has increased 81% since 1999: if

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consumption in 2012 was similar to 1999, Venezuela would produce 140% of the food consumed nationally. The unemployment rate decreased from 15.2% in 1998 to 6.4% in 2012, creating of over four million jobs. The working day was reduced to six hours a day and 36 hours a week, without reduction in salary. See <http://operamundi.uol.com.br/conteudo/opiniao/27642/>.

[2] The documentary *South of the Border* (2009), directed by Oliver Stone, depicts the attempted coup and the support of Chávez's government by both the army and the public.

[3] In addition, public debt declined from 45 % of GDP in 1998 to 20% in 2011. Venezuela withdrew from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, paying all its debts in advance.

[4] *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2003) is also the title of a documentary on the 2002 coup against Chávez.

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