



FORUM

The People and The Revolution: in Defence of ‘Twenty-First Century Socialism’

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Abstract: *Less than a year after the death of former President Hugo Chávez, the architect of the Bolivarian Revolution, and also within the first year in office of his successor, Nicolás Maduro, opposition protests, both violent and non-violent, have punctuated the Venezuelan political and social landscape. These largely middle-class protests have sought - among other things - to destabilize the democratically elected government of Maduro, and with that, the Bolivarian Revolution. To understand these events and the continued support of the poor and working classes for the Chávez-Maduro project, one must first examine the political history of Venezuela prior to the election of Hugo Chávez and the founding of the revolution. It is through his election that a legacy of exclusionary politics ended to be replaced with a participatory and protagonistic democracy. The revolution has thus created spaces for poor and working class Venezuelan people - and, in particular, women - to exercise a new sense of citizenship, inclusion and newly politicized social roles. The deliberately non-andocentric and inclusionary constitution of 1999, along with the creation of misiones (‘missions’ or social programmes), have also largely benefitted the poor. It is this extension of power and citizenship to the formerly excluded which explains the enduring support for the late President Chávez, the Bolivarian Revolution, and now, President Maduro.*

Keywords: Bolivarian Revolution, Chávez, Citizenship, Maduro, Venezuela, Women

In February 2014, opposition leaders called for supporters to 'light up the streets of Venezuela with struggle' as they sought to oust the government of President Nicolás Maduro from power.¹ Less than a year after the death of former President Hugo Chávez, the architect of the Bolivarian Revolution, and within Maduro's first year in office, these largely middle-class opposition protests have continued in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela over issues such as food shortages, inflation and crime, and, most importantly, to destabilize the democratically elected government of Maduro and with it, a revolution which has largely benefitted the poor and working classes. According to Ewan Robertson:

...citizens from poorer social sectors, who in their majority continue to support the administration of Nicolás Maduro have not participated in the protests, whose attendance and momentum have ebbed since February.²

Furthermore, as Maduro has met for 'peace talks' with moderate opposition leaders and has pledged to focus his attention and that of the government on solving the economic problems that the country is facing, one is reminded that this is not the first time that such events have occurred. One cannot help but be reminded of the 2002 coup against President Chávez long before he had even unveiled his twenty-first century socialist agenda to the people of Venezuela. It is in this vein that Dan Beeton-Cepr thus reminds us that 'Venezuela's latest round of violent protests appears to fit a pattern, and represents the tug-and-pull nature of the country's divided opposition'.³

Therefore, in order to understand Venezuela's current political climate under President Maduro, one must first have an understanding of the political history of Venezuela prior to the election of his predecessor Hugo Chávez. Given years of exclusionary politics coupled with periods of oil boom and oil bust, and the reactionary fiscal policies that followed, the Venezuelan people – meaning the middle and lower classes - were eager for a new politics. This led to the election of President Chávez in 1998. The 'Bolivarian Revolution' and the ensuing announcement of 'twenty-first century socialism' in 2005, while leaving many upper and upper-middle class Venezuelans feeling abandoned, have aimed to enable human and social development by creating programmes which allow the poor and excluded to live better lives. This has occurred through the purposeful development of laws, policies, programmes and institutions that seek to remove

discrimination and marginalization of both the lower classes and women, and empowers these same people by creating a new participatory and protagonistic democracy.

VENEZUELA PRE-CHÁVEZ: ELITIST AND EXCLUSIONARY

Gregory Wilpert has determined that, compared to other Latin American leftist presidents, Chávez faced far more extensive and violent opposition to his government, and, in dealing with the opposition, he became an even more radical left-wing politician than he was when he originally acceded to office.⁴ It is important to note that it was *six years* into his presidency, *after* the 2002 coup, the two-month oil industry shutdown of 2002-2003, *and* the presidential recall referendum of August 2004 that Chávez finally declared his socialist program for the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

At the World Social Forum in 2005, he stated:

We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything.

This new brand of 'twenty-first century socialism' is, according to Chávez himself, rooted in solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty and equality. Stressed as a real alternative to state socialism - and more importantly, neo-liberalism - these ideals quickly gained momentum in Venezuela, and Chávez was re-elected for a second time on December 3rd, 2006, during which time he announced that those parties which had supported him would unite to form one single party, *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV, United Socialist Party of Venezuela). Chávez would then be re-elected again in 2012, however on the basis of a somewhat smaller popular vote.

Certain pre-conditions have allowed for Venezuela's current political transformation and Chávez's rise from military prisoner to President. First, his 1999 election signalled the end of *Puntofijism*, meaning a period of political power sharing among the elite parties *Acción Democrática* (AD-Democratic Action), *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI-Committee of Independent Political Organization), and the *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD-Democratic Republican Union). This *Puntofijism* began on October 31st 1958 after the fall of the military dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jimenez. It was a time of political,

social and economic exclusion for the vast majority of Venezuela's poor, the wider underclass, and the dispossessed. A consolidation of political hegemony, this elite pact was thus underpinned by oil rents and furthered the country's unequal distribution of wealth; political and economic spaces were monopolised by those elites which held access to, and benefitted tremendously from, oil revenues which were reportedly worth over \$300 billion USD.⁵

Accordingly, as Venezuela entered a two-decade period of economic decline in 1979, waning oil revenues were not enough to maintain the clientelistic culture among the elite that the pact had produced. As such, with a large percentage of the middle class slipping into the poverty, and the poor not experiencing the higher standard of living which had been expected during the years of oil boom and (elitist) 'democracy', as the economy contracted, the discontent of the Venezuelan people simultaneously magnified.⁶ As oil prices collapsed, the government was unable to sustain the levels of spending which had characterized the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, from 1977 to 1985, amid a 70 per cent decline in real oil output, and a decline in oil prices beginning in 1981, real GDP per capita declined by 26 per cent.⁷ Throughout this period, between 1980 and 1996, there was a sustained collapse in income per capita, and poverty levels consequently skyrocketed from 17 per cent to 65 per cent.⁸ So, by 1996 Venezuela had moved from being a relatively wealthy petro-state to 'one of the very few countries in the world where per capita income was lower than it was in 1960'.⁹

STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN VENEZUELA

The government's reaction at this time was to introduce structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and in 1989 President Carlos Andrés Pérez who had actually campaigned against the neo-liberal policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), accepted a USD \$4.5 billion dollar loan from the IMF as a means 'to achieve long-term or accelerated economic growth ... by restructuring the economy and reducing government intervention'.¹⁰ The lives of many poor and working class Venezuelans worsened as social services deteriorated amid fluctuating inflation rates of 50 to 60 per cent between 1993 and 1997 and the effects of conditionalities which called for large spending cuts and increases in both subsidized gasoline prices and public transportation fares.¹¹ In

addition, during this period extensive charges of corruption were leveled against Pérez and his administration.

The imposition of such destructive neoliberal policies directly caused what Ivez Pedrazzini and Magaly Sanchez have termed a 'culture of urgency' in Venezuela, and this in turn facilitated both the politicization of much of the populace and the widespread acceptance of the alternative offered by Chávez.¹² This is further defined and elaborated by Ellner and Salas as 'a practical culture of action in which the informal economy, illegality, illegitimacy, violence, and mistrust of official society are common'.¹³ Such a culture also stemmed from the mistrust and disappointment in a neoliberal discourse which affirms that democracy and economic growth will necessarily improve the lives of all.

This 'culture of urgency' or 'practical culture of action' aided in the events that are referred to as the *Caracazo* in Venezuela. On February 27th, 1989, amid increased gasoline prices and rising public transportation fares, rioting enveloped the country. In response, Pérez dispatched the military and police to quell the disturbances, resulting in the deaths of anywhere between 276 to 3000 people.¹⁴ According to Jackson, Pérez placed the blame for the *Caracazo*

on the 'inflexibility' of industrial states which, through the IMF, forced his government to impose a severe programme of economic austerity which provoked instability and violence.¹⁵

Consequently, and in addition to an 'increased perception of corruption' during this time, Rafael Caldera,¹⁶ now of the *Convergencia Nacional* political party, won the 1993 presidential election signifying the first time that non-*Punto Fijo* parties had won a majority of votes.¹⁷ As an aside, it is also interesting to note how in 2007 President Chávez stated that, having repaid its debt five years ahead of schedule, he would withdraw Venezuela from the World Bank and IMF due to what he describes as the institutions' policies which perpetuate poverty.¹⁸

THE EMERGENCE OF CHÁVEZ

As already noted, it was the election of Chávez in 1998 that finally signified an end to *puntofijismo*. He represented a vision of the Left which had been repressed during the *Punto Fijo* years, and placed strong emphasis on an all-inclusive participatory democracy within which there would exist a political system which was neither held

captive by corruption nor by neoliberal policies. He also advocated a system in which social justice, Latin American integration and national sovereignty were central. Then of the *Movimiento V [Quinta] República* (MVR, or Fifth Republic Movement), Chávez was elected President on December 6th, 1998. He was elected on a broad base, including much of the middle class, although this would begin to change as soon as 2001. This loss of middle-class support can be accounted for, at least partly, by the soaring inflation rates and reduced government spending which obtained between 2001 and 2002, and which were primarily products of the fallout from the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States. During this period, inflation increased from 12 per cent to 35 per cent, the currency was devalued, and, furthermore, unemployment grew from 13 per cent to 17 per cent.¹⁹

These economic trends affected the middle class more than they did the poor and working classes. Take for instance the currency devaluation. Wilpert explains that this had a more negative affect on the middle class because, with their fixed incomes holding half of the value that they once did, the relative decrease in purchasing power meant that they were unable to buy the imported consumer goods to which they had become accustomed.²⁰ By contrast, because the poorer sections of society are more likely to work in the informal sectors of the economy, they were actually better able to adjust their incomes and spending to match the inflation. He further explains this situation as follows:

...the poor tend to have more of a social net that softens the impact of inflation, in the form of larger extended families and communities that help each other out and in the form of free public services, such as health care and education. The middle class, however, tends to rely on private education, and private health care, which is of a better quality, but which have to be discontinued as soon as the prices for these service rise too much for their income.²¹

Middle class support for Chávez, then, declined significantly during this period of economic recession, fuelled further by the decline in the price of oil to \$16 a barrel at the end of 2001.²² This occurred before he unveiled the twenty-first century socialist agenda and then created the *misiones* ('missions', or social programmes) in 2006 as a means to alleviate poverty and create opportunities for the poor and working classes. Once this happened, it further distanced both Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution from the

middle and upper class populace as these programmes simply did not benefit them.

THE (GENDERED) ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE REVOLUTION

The revolutionary unveiling of Chávez after his re-election in 2005 signaled to the previously ignored Venezuelan citizenry that a new life of inclusion and actualized citizenship awaited them. This was facilitated through greater access to education and employment through the different *misiones*. The results of these policies have been striking. The percentage of the population living in extreme poverty had decreased from 24.66 per cent in the first half of 1998 to 9.6 per cent in the second half of 2007.²³ The general poverty index also decreased from 49 per cent in 1998 to 24.2 per cent in 2009.²⁴ The percentage of poor households also declined: from 25.47 per cent in the first half of 1997 to 7.9 per cent in the second half of 2007.²⁵ The percentage of the population with access to clean drinking water and sanitation increased from, respectively, 80 and 62 per cent in 1998 to 92 and 82 per cent in 2007.²⁶ Primary school enrolment has also increased: from 87 per cent in 1999 to 93.9 per cent in 2009.²⁷ This has occurred in tandem with a rising adult literacy rate, from 89.8 per cent to 95.5 per cent between 1990 and 2009.²⁸

Beyond these general improvements in the lives of formerly marginalized people, it is poor and working class women who have benefitted the most since 1998. This greater inclusion can be seen, for example, in the 1999 Constitution that was put before the electorate in December of that year and approved by an overwhelming 71.8 per cent of voters. First, the new constitution changed the name of the country from the 'Republic of Venezuela' to the 'Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela', in honour of the great hero, Simón Bolívar. Second, it is marked by its gender inclusivity as it incorporates the masculine and feminine versions of all political actors, mentioning, for example, '*Presidente o Presidenta*'. The constitution can also be described as 'non-andocentric', and it explicitly adopts the definition of discrimination against women that has been set up by the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) so that acts are also discriminatory if they produce inequality. In addition, several articles within the constitution provide pivotal women's rights provisions. For example, Article 21 states that all persons are equal before the law, and, consequently there must be no discrimination

based on race, sex, creed or social standing. Moreover, it is also both path-breaking and unique in its recognition of women's reproductive work in the household. Article 88 states:

The State guarantees the equality and equitable treatment of men and women in the exercise of the right to work. The state recognizes work at home as an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth. Housewives are entitled to Social Security in accordance with law.²⁹

Articles 75 and 76 also make provisions for 'protection to the mother, father or other person acting as head of a household', and it protects motherhood and guarantees full access to family planning services.

Furthermore, in 2000 the *Instituto Nacional de la Mujer* (INAMUJER, or National Institute for Women) was formed by a presidential mandate in accordance with the Law of Equal Opportunities for Women (Article 44). INAMUJER has been successful in promoting anti-domestic violence legislation and in light of this, Venezuela has been described as

one of the few Latin American countries that acknowledges violence and discrimination against women as impeding the evolution of a truly democratic society based on equality.³⁰

Moreover, by May 2008 over twenty-five *misiones* had been created. For example, *Misión Mercal* or *Mercado de Alimentos* (Food Market), which has been described as one of the most important anti-poverty programs, was created on April, 22nd, 2003. This mission provides food to the poor at government-subsidised prices, and the program has been able to increase the amount of food sold from approximately 880 tons of food per day to 1.2 million persons in 2004, to about 4,700 tons of food per day to more than 11 million Venezuelans today.

On March 23, 2006, Chávez introduced the *Misión Madres del Barrio* or Mothers of the Barrio. While unveiling the program, he stated that 'with this mission, we want to give a hand to mothers who are in need, and homemakers without a fixed income'. As such, poor women who have children and no form of income because they are unemployed – or, at least unemployed in the formal economy beyond the household - are given a monthly stipend, which is equivalent to 80 per cent of the minimum wage (about \$180 per month).

Another popular mission is *Barrio Adentro*. This mission provides free healthcare to Venezuelan citizens. Education and literacy missions such as *Misión Robinson* (literacy training), *Misión Ribas* (high school completion) and *Misión Sucre* (university scholarships) have also been extremely beneficial to Venezuelan people. Coupled with universal access to education, the country is now largely free of illiteracy as *Misión Robinson* has allowed for around 1.5 million Venezuelans to learn to read and write. As a result of *Misión Robinson II*, secondary school enrollment rose from 53.6 per cent in 2000 to 73.3 per cent in 2011. Similarly, *Misión Ribas* and *Misión Sucre* have together greatly increased the number of tertiary students from 895,000 in 2000 to 2.3 million in 2011.³¹

As a means of wealth distribution, the Chávez government also created micro-credit programs. Targeting the country's poor, these initiatives permit individuals or families to receive the collateral necessary to create and own a micro-enterprise. Consequently, the following banks have been created to assist with this: the *Banco Del Pueblo* (People's Bank), *Fondo de Desarrollo Microfinanciero* (Fondemi, meaning Fund for Micro-Finance Development), and, crucially, *Banco de la Mujer* (Women's Bank) which issues micro-credit loans to small groups (normally between nine and five) of women, who can all be members of the same family. This has led to significant growth in cooperatives, which go hand-in-hand with micro-credit programs. This has in turn boosted employment, as today over 16 per cent of formally employed Venezuelans are employed in a cooperative. They also provide a flexible source of work and income for (often poorer) people who juggle competing responsibilities, and as a result, since *Banmujer* provides the necessary microfinance, it is women who have tended to benefit the most.

The creation of *consejos comunales* (community councils) in April 2006 typified Chávez's commitment to the development of a participatory democracy, and with it community development. This initiative sought to empower local citizens within their own communities. Article 2 of the Organic Law of Community Councils states:

Community councils in the constitutional framework of participatory democracy, are instances of participation, coordination and integration between the various community organizations, social groups and citizens, that allow the people to directly exercise organized management of public policies and

projects to meet the needs and aspirations of communities in building a society of equity and social justice.

The *consejos comunales* thus allow for the Venezuelan people to govern themselves in their local communities, and, in this way, to also have a say in the creation and enactment of policies and programs emanating from the national level. Women have figured greatly in the *consejos comunales*, as many of them, mostly mothers and housewives who, before the Bolivarian process, were not included in any such political and community processes, are now the heads and spokespersons for their *consejos comunales*. In 2007, a year after their creation, women accounted for 60 per cent of membership of these councils, and today women dominate their leadership.

A NEW KIND OF CITIZENSHIP

The benefits of the revolution have not only been material, but also ideological, especially with regard to notions of citizenship. As suggested earlier, it is notable that women's work in the household was explicitly recognized in a constitutional sense. While society has traditionally privileged the work undertaken in the public economic sphere above that done by women in the private domestic sphere, the 1999 constitution recognizes the work of women in the household and as such, monthly stipends are provided to poor mothers through *Misión Madres del Barrio*. As a result, poor women, and especially mothers, felt that for the first time the state was paying attention to them. In this way, Chávez encouraged the people to 'actualize' their citizenship through mobilization and political debate.³²

While voter turnout is important in any election, President Chávez has also incorporated those social, cultural and symbolic practices that make citizens.³³ A number of quotes from interviews conducted with women in Mérida in Venezuela in April 2011 illustrate this clearly. For example, Celia, 34 years old and a mother of one from claimed that 'Chávez made me feel like a citizen. Before I did not feel like that'. Likewise both Gabriella, 28 and also a mother of one, and Imelda, 43 and a mother of three, consistently mentioned the term 'citizen' or *ciudadano* while being interviewed. For these women and for women like them, citizenship not only means the right to vote, as per what we have come to know as a rather limited political citizenship under liberal democracy, but it also involves their right *to rights themselves*, and, as a result, their

acts of citizenship define their rights to rights. In this way, because some women - due to their inclusion and recognition in the national constitution, access to resources that were inaccessible before, and a generally better standard of living overall - are now able to 'actualize' their citizenship, they act towards helping the state achieve its social and political goals. Consequently, the citizenship of many women is inextricably linked with the state, meaning that the state's successes are their own (and so too, of course, its failures).

Therefore, in creating spaces for ordinary Venezuelan women, the Bolivarian Revolution has bestowed upon them new politicized social roles, and a new kind of citizenship. This has been both cause and consequence of their inclusion in a political process which is founded upon ideas of participatory and protagonistic democracy. Women of the *marea roja*, for example (meaning 'the red tide' or 'red sea' and also sometimes described as 'the pink tide'), are able to actualize their citizenship in their support for twenty-first century socialism. Even the *ni-nis* (the politically neutral or undecided voters) who remain powerful in their political neutrality, have an understanding of the policies and programs which twenty-first century socialism has provided; even though they may not support the revolution itself, they are still able to enjoy the citizenship rights that these programmes facilitate, and benefit from the new laws and policies which the Chávez project has generated.

CONCLUSION: AN ENDURING REVOLUTION

Given such unstinting – and very public - support by groups like the *marea roja*, the pejorative labels of 'populism' and 'clientelism' have begun to be used to describe the political processes of twenty-first century socialism. However, what this article has suggested are new ways of looking at, and theorizing, 'populism' and 'clientelism'. The analysis ventured here reminds us about the democratic socialist context of the Bolivarian state and especially of the agency of the people in its intellectual and political genesis. The Venezuelan people are far from powerless or somehow held captive by the Bolivarian state. Support for the revolution is negotiated daily, especially among the poor and working classes who exist amid a class system that had formerly kept them out of the political process and thus largely powerless. Now, inclusion

into the political process has meant a new sense of citizenship, agency, and, of course, power.

This necessarily brings with it a demonstrably strong attachment, both to the late President, Hugo Chávez, in whose image the revolution was constructed, and, more recently, his successor President Nicolás Maduro. The latter was explicitly chosen by the former to continue the revolution, and Maduro has thus inherited much of the support that his predecessor enjoyed. This is also why Diaz Eleazar Rangel maintains that

the fact that there's been better service to the poor, with numerous social investments, and that today these people, including the elderly, live better than 10 or 15 years ago explains why the popular neighborhoods have not joined the middle class protests, neither the peaceful majority of them and much less the violent factions.³⁴

After many years of political, social and economic exclusion preceding the emergence of Hugo Chávez, poorer Venezuelans have benefitted both economically and in terms of their extended citizenship from the changes wrought by the Bolivarian Revolution; therein lies their enduring support.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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