VENEZUELA TODAY: 
A ‘PARTICIPATIVE AND PROTAGONISTIC’ 
DEMOCRACY?
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Since the electoral victory of Chávez and his supporters – the so-called ‘Polo Patriótico’ – in December 1998, Venezuela has been undergoing a process of change in all aspects of its social life. Chávez offered Venezuelans a radical political proposal: to replace the elite that had been in power since 1958, to put an end to the prevailing corruption, and to introduce a new constitution which would transform Venezuelan democracy into one that would be ‘participative and protagonistic’. Eight years later, in December 2006, after overcoming a coup and winning a referendum for his recall, Chávez was elected president again. Speaking at a massive political demonstration after his election he reaffirmed his electoral promise to lead Venezuela rapidly toward a ‘socialism of the twenty-first century’.

The main events of these eight years are more or less well known; the particular focus of this essay is on the prospects for the promise contained in the idea of ‘socialism of the twenty-first century’, and in particular, its promise of a ‘participative and protagonistic’ democracy. This promise, which started to be developed during his first term, aroused the enthusiasm of the poorest sections of the population who had been deprived of their essential rights in previous decades, as well as high expectations on the part of an international left still searching for a way to move beyond the sense of defeat induced by the collapse of actually-existing socialism after 1989. Initially, the international left distrusted Chávez for his military background, for his populist rhetoric and for the political coalition that supported him, made up of personalities and parties with very diverse ideological positions. However, once Chávez halted the processes of neoliberal change, and was strongly attacked for this by the international financial agencies and the US government, he aroused the curiosity and then the interest of an international left that today
invests the Venezuelan process with its hopes for a viable alternative model to capitalism.

At home, in his first eight years in office Chávez managed to sustain and even increase popular support for his political project of participative democracy. Once he had survived the coup d’état of April 11, 2002, and the oil sabotage/strike at the end of that year, that project began to take clearer shape. With growing financial resources, thanks to the combination of reform in the oil sector and the rising price of oil, the government started to promote novel social and economic policies, through special taskforces called ‘missions’, whereby the popular sectors gained real access to some of the rights denied them during the previous decades of crisis and neoliberal adjustment. These policies, conceived as instruments to promote the organization and participation of the people and their communities, sparked a popular effervescence that continues until now and that has permitted poor Venezuelans especially to overcome the effects of two decades of economic stagnation, political apathy and pessimism about the future.

Yet the political process during these eight years has been contradictory and stressful, with incipient effects that threaten to undermine its positive tendencies in the medium term. This process has unfolded in a context marked by high political polarization, in which powerful and conflicting interests, not only in Venezuelan society but also in the wider world, confront each other. For these reasons, information about Venezuela’s evolution is usually of poor quality, difficult to access and interpret. This makes it all the more essential to have a critical analysis pointing out weaknesses as well as strengths so as to contribute some clarity to the debates taking place around current developments. This essay seeks to do this. To set the issues in the necessary context, a brief account is first offered of some of the factors which brought Chávez to power, and the most important events and socio-economic processes which occurred during his first term as president, and which condition the prospects for his second term.

CHÁVEZ AND HIS MOVEMENT TAKE POWER: THE NEW CONSTITUTION

There is already an extensive literature dedicated to explaining how a military outsider, promising a radical socio-political transformation, succeeded in shaking to its roots what was considered one of the most stable of Latin American democracies. While there are differences of emphasis, there is general agreement that it was the result of a combination of mutually-reinforcing factors. Twenty years of economic stagnation without an apparent solution in sight, structural adjustment policies which aggravated an already
grossly unequal income distribution; the undermining of the ‘modern’ social structure built on the basis of the previous development model; the growth of the informal economy and the lack, for the majority of the population, of any prospect of social advancement or even social inclusion; all these factors contributed to the conjuncture of 1998. These same factors had already contributed to a popular rebellion in February 1989, known as the Caracazo, which indicated a radical repudiation of the old socio-political order and marked the beginning of a search for alternatives.

After the Caracazo, discontent directly affected the political system. Street protests, which from then on become more numerous and visible, reflected not only an increasingly widespread rejection of the dominant political parties; they also led to a mounting institutional crisis and undermined the system of political representation. With two attempted coups in 1992, the military added a new dimension to an already explosive situation. The attempts to overthrow President Carlos Andrés Pérez, although defeated, weakened him and led, first, to his removal from office by the National Congress, and then, in the following presidential elections in December 1993, to the collapse of the two-party system, when Rafael Caldera won without the support of either of the two hitherto dominant parties. Then, between 1994 and 1998, the failure of the Caldera government to overcome economic stagnation, together with the increasingly serious social imbalances provoked by a new set of neoliberal measures, finally produced a radicalization of political attitudes amongst the population. In 1998, there was a final ingredient: the collapse of oil prices on the world market. In December, the electorate opted for the military figure who had headed the first of the 1992 coups and who, with his polarizing discourse and the promise to displace the existing, discredited elite, offered the opportunity to punish the old political establishment and – perhaps – initiate a process capable of overcoming the legacy of the previous twenty years.

Once in office, Chávez and his movement began with a constitutional process designed to replace the 1961 constitution, as promised in the election campaign. The new constitution, sanctioned in a referendum in December 1999, introduced a series of mechanisms aimed at replacing Venezuela’s ‘representative’ democracy with a ‘participative and protagonistic’ version. Running counter to the prevailing neoliberal tendency, the constitution ratified the central role of the state, the universal nature of social rights, and oil as an inalienable property of the state. The country was renamed the ‘Bolivarian Venezuelan Republic’. Amongst the new mechanisms for promoting participation, the constitution incorporated several different kinds of referendum (approbatory, consultative, recall and repeal), legislative initiatives (to approve
or revise the constitution or laws), open municipal council sessions and citizens’ assemblies. Together, all these measures put an end to the neoliberal policies of the previous decade.

The eight years from 1999 to late 2006 (when Chávez began his second term as president) have witnessed intense popular mobilizations, political confrontations, an attempted coup in April 11, 2002, and an oil stoppage-sabotage by the elite in charge of the state-owned oil industry which paralyzed the industry from December 2002 to February 2003. In this last confrontation, the government emerged victorious, recovering its control of the industry and dismissing about half of its employees, mainly high-level executive staff. As a result, the government was able to implement its oil reform. This involved the recovery of the state’s control over the formulation, implementation and supervision of the public oil company’s policies. In the nineties, these powers had been assumed by the company’s executives under the neoliberal policy of ‘Apertura petrolera’, which tended to disregard the public interest in favour of the company’s corporate interests and eventually tended towards a re-privatization of PDVSA. Chavez’ victory brought with it increased oil revenues with which to finance his social and political programme. In August 2004, the opposition was able to activate a recall referendum against the president; this was converted into another victory for Chávez, confirming him in office until the end of his term. And in December 2006, as already mentioned, he was re-elected.

During his first eight years, the application of the participative democracy principle to social and economic policies attacking the problem of social exclusion has been one of the major achievements of the Chávez government. It has created the necessary conditions and institutional mechanisms to stimulate the self-management of the popular sectors, dynamizing the organization of the country’s poor communities, and thus introducing not only an element capable of improving public efficiency, but also a carrier of self-development, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging and solidarity, which have expanded and strengthened citizenship and democracy.

Before 1999, the popular movement was prostrate and disorganized, its members hard hit by almost two decades of neoliberal economic policy. Furthermore, before the Chávez government came to power the popular movement did not have the organic base, traditions, or a strong enough articulation to be able to operate autonomously and take initiatives vis-à-vis the power of the state. Venezuelan representative democracy had favoured the cooptation of popular movements – as well as of the trade unions – by the two-party system that emerged in the sixties. From a small, poorly organized, dispersed and fragmented movement, an extensive range of new popular
organizations were stimulated into being through various policies and social programs during Chávez’s first term – especially from 2003 onwards when the government took control of the PDVSA oil corporation and its resources.

At the beginning of the president’s new term of office, the context is complex and prediction uncertain. Though the government has rightly acted to stimulate from above the organization and mobilization of its base, there is a very strong asymmetry between a state rich in oil resources and a popular movement full of needs and historically weak as far as autonomy is concerned. This makes fostering popular organizational and participatory dynamics into one of the government’s major challenges; protecting the plurality of social and productive organizations, while at the same time respecting their development so that they can advance to higher levels of autonomous participation in public management, and acquire increasing capacities to control it. This is essential if the popular movement is to be fortified enough to act as an interlocutor with the various agencies of public management, thus guaranteeing it the capacity to control them. Otherwise, there is a high risk of returning to the clientelistic and paternalistic patterns that prevailed in the old Venezuelan political culture of representative democracy.

THE CONTEXT AFTER DECEMBER 2006

One of Chávez’s main strengths at the start of his second term was the sheer scale of the support he received in the December 2006 election, affording an important legitimacy to his subsequent initiatives. Chávez won with 7,309,080 valid votes (62.9 per cent) against 4,292,466 (36.9 per cent) for his rival, Manuel Rosales. The polarization between these two candidates was the most marked in Venezuela’s electoral history; the two shared between them 99.8 per cent of the valid votes; the candidate who came in third received less than 5,000 votes. Turnout was high at 74.9 per cent and invalid votes accounted for a mere 1.4 per cent. Moreover Chávez increased his share of the vote in each successive election. In the recall referendum he received 59.1 per cent of the vote; in the 2006 election, he got 62.9 per cent.

This convincing electoral victory can be accounted for to a large extent by the vigorous and sustained economic growth of the Venezuelan economy since 2004, when the government had overcome the most violent phase of political confrontation. That year, the economy recovered from the impact of the oil stoppage with a GNP growth of 17.9 per cent. From then on, during the following two years, GNP growth averaged more than 9 per cent (see Table 1).
Table 1: Some Macroeconomic Indicators, 2003-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Price per barrel of Venezuelan oil exports (US$)</th>
<th>International Reserves (millions of US$)</th>
<th>Inflation (% change in consumer prices)</th>
<th>Change of GNP</th>
<th>Exchange Rate (Bs. x $)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>21.366</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>- 7.7</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>24.208</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>30.368</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>2150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>31.917*</td>
<td>13.4**</td>
<td>9.6**</td>
<td>2150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* First six months  ** Year to October.


As can be seen from Table 1, this impressive economic performance was due, above all, to the price of Venezuelan oil in the international market, averaging $US 55.9 per barrel during the election year. This, together with the ability of the government to apply its oil reform from 2003 onwards, was reflected in a boom in available revenues, enabling it to pursue multiple social policies. Missions (programs bypassing uncooperative or ineffective state agencies), such as Barrio Adentro (free 24 hours a day primary health care and disease prevention for low income groups), Mercal (state distribution of food at subsidized prices), Robinson 1 and 2 (literacy and primary education for adults), Ribas and Sucre (secondary and university education for those who had missed or not finished these), Vuelvan Caras (training for employment), and the Bolivarian schools, where a full day schedule has been restored, with two free meals and two snacks a day, plus free uniforms and textbooks: all these undoubtedly had a positive political impact. The government has also invested in the social economy, as in the ‘ruedas de negocios’, in which the creation of cooperatives is encouraged in order to supply goods and services to the state sector. The government has also created a system of micro-financing with the Women’s Bank, the Sovereign People’s Bank, and so on, which make small loans to lower income borrowers.

These and other policies help to explain how, in recent years, poverty has fallen, and unemployment has been reduced. At the same time, the country has attained one of the highest Human Development Indices in Latin
Table 2 presents the official statistics, indicating clearly why Chávez and his movement obtained the support of the majority in December 2006, especially among those with lower incomes.

Table 2: Some Socio-Economic Indices, 2003–2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate (%)</th>
<th>Poor Homes (%)</th>
<th>Extremely Poor Homes (%)</th>
<th>Human Development Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>55.1</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>9.9*</td>
<td>33.9**</td>
<td>10.6**</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Third quarter ** First six months


It is important to emphasize that these advances are almost exclusively based on oil revenues. According to the Venezuelan Central Bank, in 2006, 89 per cent of our exports were oil. We are as dependent on oil as in the past, if not more so. If we examine the current relationship between the state and PDVSA (the state-owned oil corporation) in terms of the hard currency earned by the firm, in 2006 the state received 68 per cent while 32 per cent remained in the hands of PDVSA. The oil sector represents 14 per cent of the GNP.6

‘TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SOCIALISM’

The promise of ‘twenty-first century socialism’, one of the key themes in the December 2006 election campaign, was also, until then, an open and barely-defined formula, susceptible to diverse interpretations. Chávez used the expression for the first time in the 5th World Social Forum in January 2005 held in Porto Alegre but did little to define it, apart from declaring that it meant an abandonment of the ‘Third Way’ as a development model. He insisted that it should not be confused with a socialist state like those developed in the Soviet Union or the Eastern European countries, or in Cuba; what he had in mind was a less state-centred and a more pluralist society.7 In mid-2006, at an event in Vienna, he affirmed that the basis for this new socialism was ‘solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty and equality’ – that is to say, the traditional ideals of socialism. He argued that it was not a question of a predetermined
model of socialism, but rather ‘of transforming the mode of production in
the direction of a socialism that needs to be built on an everyday basis’. 8

Apart from these indications, during the 2006 election campaign there
was little to suggest a more precise definition of the term, except for two
details which suggested certain contradictions with the idea of deepening
democratic participation. On several occasions Chávez said that when he
won he would modify the constitution to introduce an unlimited possibil-
ity of re-election for the incumbent president. At the same time, Francisco
Ameliach, his campaign manager, threatened the opposition by saying that if
they boycotted the election the right to proportional representation contem-
plated in the constitution would be eliminated. 9

Apart from these two elements, until late 2006 Chávez’s proposed new
socialism was vague and open-ended. Indeed, until the December elections,
twenty-first century socialism was a concept without a precise content, un-
derstood by each and everyone in terms of his or her unsatisfied demands
and aspirations. As Ernesto Laclau argues, phrases like ‘twenty-first century
socialism’ are particularly attractive in societies with an accumulation of un-
resolved problems; a multiplicity of demands become related in a ‘chain of
equivalences’, finally represented by just one of them. This ‘empty signifier’– in the Venezuelan case, ‘twenty-first century socialism’ – is central to popu-
list discourse; it has a notable capacity to mobilize for change. 10

Once the electoral triumph had been achieved, however, President Chávez
began to give a more concrete content to the concept. In three key speeches
during the weeks following the election he talked in more precise terms of
the ideas and instruments he had in mind to produce a profound transfor-
mation of Venezuelan society. In a speech on the 15th December, during an
electoral victory celebration with his followers, Chávez invited all the parties
which supported his government to dissolve themselves in order to found
a single, united party: ‘what the revolution needs is a united party: a party,
not a soup of acronyms which leads us to deceive the people’. He warned
that if they did not do so, ‘of course, they leave the government, leave the
government, they leave my government’. 11 He proposed that the new party
should be named the Venezuelan United Socialist Party (PSUV). Although
he thought of the PSUV as an instrument for ‘electoral battles’, he insisted
that it should transcend this function and also do battle in the sphere of ideas:
‘We must study a lot… read a lot, discuss a lot, organize round tables, square
tables, meetings of socialist squadrons, of detachments to read…’. 12 He pre-
dicted that it would be the largest and most democratic party in Venezuelan
history.
Shortly afterwards, Chávez made two more important speeches, the first in the largest theatre in the country – the Teresa Carreño – on the 7th January; and the second on the 10th in the National Assembly, on the occasion of the formal inauguration of his second term. In these two speeches Chávez offered more precise ideas on his strategy for advancing towards a twenty-first century socialism. He announced the nationalization of the strategic industries which had been privatized during the previous administrations, and described ‘five constituent motors’ that were to drive the next stage of the Bolivarian revolution. Before the members of the National Assembly and representatives of the other public authorities he announced the slogan for his new term: ‘Fatherland, Socialism or Death, I swear it’.

The constituent motors would ‘turn on the engine’ that would carry the country to socialism. The first, an Enabling Law, already in the constitution, gives the Legislature power to delegate to the National Executive, for a predetermined period, the capacity to make decrees with the force of law (Article 203). Chávez called this ‘the law of revolutionary laws, the mother of laws’. The second motor was a proposed ‘integral and profound’ reform of the constitution, with the object, amongst others, of modifying the articles which, in relation to economic and political questions, could be interpreted as obstacles on the road to socialism. Chávez considered that these two motors should run in tandem and appointed the President of the National Assembly, Cilia Flores, to preside over and coordinate the commission dedicated to the constitutional reform. The third motor of the revolution was called ‘morality and enlightenment’; this refers to a campaign designed to promote moral, economic, political and social education in all spheres of society – schools, workshops, the countryside, endogenous nuclei and other popular spaces. The fourth motor Chávez called ‘the geometry of power’: this was a proposed new geographic distribution of political, economic, social and military power across the nation, in order to generate the construction of cities and federal territories more in line with socialist aspirations and current realities. Finally, he proposed a fifth motor, according to him the most important: the ‘revolutionary explosion of communal power’, according to which popular power would be promoted within the state, modifying its nature and making it socialist. Chávez talked of setting no limits to the communal councils, because these are the primary expression of popular power.

Chávez held that all these motors are interconnected and that ‘the creative explosion of communal power will depend for its development, for its force, for its roots, for its expansion, for its success, on the other motors, on the Reform of the Constitution, it is going to depend to a great extent on the Enabling Laws, on the National Campaign of Morality and Enlightenment,
it is going to depend on the new geometry of power, and on other factors’.

On several occasions the President underlined the need to ‘accelerate the
temporal rhythm and open up new spaces on the road to the new era which
begins today’.

Within a few days, the executive introduced its project for an Enabling
Law in the National Assembly, asking for authorization to legislate for a pe-
riod of a year and a half in ten broad areas of public administration, includ-
ing civil and judicial security, popular participation, finance and taxation,
economic and social policy, values in the exercise of the public function,
energy, defence and security, science and technology, and boundary changes.
Two weeks later the National Assembly unanimously approved the request,
adding another sphere of action to those already covered – hydrocarbons.
And in mid-January the President as part of these decisions also appointed
a Presidential Commission for the Constitutional Reform (CPRC) and a
Presidential Commission for Popular Power (CPPP) to help him employ his
powers in these areas under the Enabling Law.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEW MEASURES

It should be pointed out that the re-nationalization of the strategic firms, like
the telephone company CANTV, and the new nationalizations, like that of
Electricidad de Caracas, announced by the President in these speeches and car-
rried out soon after, could be implemented without modifying the constitu-
tion. The 1999 constitution is sufficiently generous in the powers conceded
to the state to abridge private property in the defence of social interests:
it recognizes different forms of property and accords priority to the social
economy. In consequence, these first presidential announcements appear de-
signed primarily to promote a change of some importance in political insti-
tutions. We next consider the most important of these in turn.

The Enabling Law

This first motor is based on a constitutional provision that authorizes the
President and the executive to elaborate and approve laws by decree. In this
sense, it is in accordance with the rule of law. However, the President’s re-
quest, for authorization for a period of a year and a half, and to legislate in
ten broadly-defined areas – which then became eleven as a result of the As-
sembly’s initiative – reveals the confirmation and acceleration of a tendency
already apparent during the President’s first term: a strengthening of the
executive branch of government at the expense of the Legislative, a tendency
which acquired a fresh impulse from 2006 on, since when Congress has been
100 per cent in the hands of the Bolivarian forces as a result of the decision of
The opposition parties to withdraw their candidates during the parliamentary elections of December 2005.

The 1961 constitution had envisaged the possibility of an Enabling Law, which was then defined as a special law approved by Congress to empower the President to dictate laws as ‘extraordinary measures of an economic or fiscal character when the national interest requires it’ (Article 190, Section 8). This delegation of the legislative function to the executive was extended in the 1999 constitution, in that there is now no clause limiting it to a specific area; the law must simply specify a predetermined period of time. Since 1999, this broadening of the legislative capacity of the executive has generated controversy among constitutionalists, and this particular request – the third initiative of this type since Chávez came to power – has been considered unconstitutional by some on account of the generic nature of the areas to which it is applied and the length of the period during which it is valid, arguing that it effectively undermines the legislative function which is a prerogative of the Legislature.19

In any event, with government supporters in absolute control of the National Assembly, it was puzzling to many people that the executive should have made a request for powers defined in such broad terms. The President alleged the urgency of the changes which, according to him, did not permit a loss of time in legislative debates. However, beyond the question of the appropriateness of introducing profound changes at a forced pace, the rapidity with which the National Assembly accepted the request, approved two weeks after it had been introduced, above all revealed the passive attitude of the highest legislative authority in face of the executive. It meant a self-exclusion of the legislature from the reform process, and this, in turn, meant eliminating, for the Chavist masses who had elected it, the most natural institutional context for deliberating on, and taking decisions about, the shape of ‘twenty-first century socialism’. Furthermore, the question of participation and popular power itself was included in the scope of the Enabling Law, which means that it will be the President, his ministers and those he deems appropriate to consult who will elaborate the proposal for popular power. This is evidently in contradiction with the participative democracy which it is supposed to promote. We return to this point below.

The constitutional reform

To activate the second motor, an ‘integral and profound’ reform of the constitution, the President, as already mentioned, appointed a presidential commission, the CPRC, consisting of 19 members headed by the President of the National Assembly, Cilia Flores. It includes, as executive secretary, the
President of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, the People’s Defense Representative and the Attorney General, together with representatives of various public institutions. Article 2 of the decree stipulates that the Commission is committed to keep its deliberations confidential: its members are not permitted to divulge their ideas, the terms of the debate or the proposals, without the permission of the President of the republic.

It should be pointed out that the Bolivarian constitution provides that the State Council is the highest organ for the purpose of government consultation on policy matters of national interest and particular importance. It is composed of the Vice-President as coordinator, five members appointed by the president, a representative designated by the National Assembly, another by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice, and another by the various state governors. The fact that Chávez ignored this constitutional instrument, made up of a clear majority of government sympathizers but at the same time permitting autonomy to the other state powers in choosing their representatives, suggests that the message of the Enabling Law was being reinforced: all other state powers are to be subordinated to the executive.

Furthermore, on the question of constitutional reform, the President and/or his spokespersons have been anticipating some specific proposals which point in the same direction. One is the proposal for unlimited re-election of the President. This proposal was first launched in the election campaign and has been repeated in numerous presidential speeches and in declarations by leaders and functionaries. More recently, there has been talk of extending the proposal to all publicly-elected posts. The principle of alternating in power, which was incorporated into all Venezuela’s previous democratic constitutions (those of 1947, 1961 and 1999), is evidently undermined by this proposal.

Another related proposal is to eliminate proportional representation. This proposal emerged, as we noted earlier, as a threat to the opposition during the 2006 presidential election campaign, when the government thought that the opposition meant to withdraw its candidature from the presidential race at the last moment, leaving Chávez as the only candidate. Eliminating proportional representation, first established in the 1947 constitution, would mean the disappearance of small minority parties from legislative bodies. A third proposal by Chávez is for multiple Vice-Presidencies, appointed by him, who he could send to coordinate national plans in the different regions of the country. This would involve inevitable tensions, with a potential weakening, or even elimination, of the state governors who are elected on the basis of a universal, direct and secret vote.
Apart from this, the fact that the constitutional reform coincides with the application of the Enabling Law suggests an additional and disturbing possibility. The Enabling Law is itself an exceptional measure which is limited only by the terms of the constitution. As its application coincides with the proposed constitutional reform, the president has the means to implement his proposals without any effective constraints.

**THE COMMUNAL COUNCILS**

In the presidential speeches dedicated to sketching the guidelines for achieving a twenty-first century socialism, the configuration of a new structure of popular power, made up of communal councils as vehicles for participation, self-management and popular self-government, is considered of central importance. As we have already noted, the president appointed a Presidential Council for Popular Power (CPPP) in conformity with the Law on Communal Councils sanctioned by the National Assembly in 2006. In addition, as also noted above, the executive included in the Enabling Law everything related to the question of participation, announcing the need for a reform of the Law on Communal Councils with a view to vitalizing popular power, a reform which would be included in the text of the new constitution.

According to the law currently in force, in cities communal councils are established on the basis of a maximum of 400 families each, sharing a common geographical area. In rural areas and in the indigenous communities the number of families covered can be substantially less. All the organizations active in the same location are to be incorporated within the councils: the technical water round tables, the health committees, the urban or rural land committees, the sports clubs, the women’s groups, cultural groups, etc. The law, taking into account the leadership role anticipated for the councils, envisages a process of preparation prior to their formalization. First, a citizen’s assembly is to be convoked to elect a provisional preparatory commission, which is entrusted with the task of creating the right conditions for the eventual formalization of the communal council, preparing a census of the community, organizing an electoral commission and electing a permanent promotion commission. Once these conditions have been fulfilled, a constituent assembly is convoked and spokespeople (‘vocals’) are elected for the various commissions of the council stipulated in the law (2006, Article 15).

The communal councils adopt decisions in citizens’ assemblies. There, on the basis of a secret vote, the ‘vocals’ of the commissions are elected. It is also to be a different kind of representation from that of the past – as, for example in the neighbourhood associations – because those elected can be recalled by the assembly at any time. The commission ‘vocals’ are authorized to form
intermediate organizations, such as federations or associations, with other councils. Their term of office lasts two years. Some public officials have suggested that this structure constitutes a sixth constitutional power, alongside the executive, legislative, judicial, electoral and citizens.\textsuperscript{21}

According to the current legal provisions, the communal councils have to be registered in the office in the presidency of the republic and the monitoring of the projects to be undertaken, and control over the available resources, is in the hands of the CPPP (at its different administrative levels – national, regional and local), all of whose members are appointed by the president. There are no links to the mayors or governors. At the same time, communal banks have to be formed as cooperatives in order to receive resources from the government. This has provoked a great deal of confusion and contradiction, because the communal councils do not share the characteristics of cooperatives, which are voluntary civil associations, based on the financial contributions or work of their associated members, whereas the communal councils are part of the state structure and are basically financed by the state.\textsuperscript{22}

It is a truism that in order for participation to contribute to genuine empowerment, it must be part of a dynamic which functions from the base upwards, strengthening the autonomy of the grass-roots organizations and their members, and providing incentives for the creation of intermediate organizations in a process of aggregation. As conceived of in the Law on Communal Councils, however, the contrary is the case. Dependency on the presidency is encouraged and there are ample opportunities for developing clientelistic relationships. The hurried way in which the councils are being formed, together with the very limited participation in the drafting of the law sanctioned in 2006, both conspire against the participative democracy they are supposed to advance, because this needs to be based on a massive participation and the time necessary for learning processes to mature. After all, what is being proposed is a profound cultural change which inevitably involves a prolonged and intrinsically difficult itinerary.

In terms of social participation, Venezuela is currently a laboratory in which the most diverse organizational forms are being created and tried out, with a view to promoting a self-development in the popular sectors. For that reason, it is risky to offer an evaluation of the results at this moment in time, when the experiences are fragmentary and information with an overall perspective, independent of official declarations and statistics, is hard to come by.

In recent months, however, while it is true that the general organizational dynamic continues, the process of organization and participation has been
reflected above all in the communal councils, as a result of the insistence of the president in his speeches and the stimulus of the resources made available by the government. According to official sources, to date about 20,000 communal councils have been created which, on a conservative estimate of councils averaging 200 members and families averaging four members, would mean that more than two thirds of the entire population of Venezuela has been integrated into this form of participative activity. When the CPPP was formed, the funds available were increased from 2 billion to 4 billion Bolivares.\footnote{23}

The communal councils have provoked great expectations, but also doubts and controversies. There are many questions that can clearly not be answered unambiguously. One of them, as has already been suggested, is whether the current conception and dynamics, stimulated from above by the government, can effectively generate a genuine process of empowering autonomous popular power. In the field we can observe a wide range of councils, some of whose priorities were imposed from above, or by small groups; others frankly organized in order to take advantage of the oil revenues for particular individual interests; while yet others contribute to self-management and serve, with varying degrees of success, the needs of the shanty towns. The lack of clear rules in the current legislation, while perhaps understandable given the nature of the processes that are being promoted, which make flexibility necessary, nevertheless undoubtedly contribute to conflicts and confusions, and lend themselves to every type of abuse. There is therefore a clear need for a reform of the law, and for a regulation which will institutionalize the process, and this should be the product of a genuine democratic debate.

Many people also ask how to resolve the problem of maintaining and increasing the levels of citizen participation and that of the communities. It is well-known that it is not always easy to sustain high levels of participation. Up to now, the combination of readily-available money and empowerment has been an important incentive.\footnote{24} However, the failure to adequately control the money disbursed is a cause for concern and could end up reproducing old (or creating new) clientelistic patterns, especially in a society so accustomed to them.

In order for participation to be genuine, it needs time to take root, as a process assumed by those involved, cultivating values of solidarity. Furthermore, it requires a processing of the tension between the time people can realistically dedicate to these communal activities and the expectations which these forms of participation stimulate. Although it is not yet clear how this problem can be resolved, there is no doubt that the resources on which the Venezuelan oil-state can count are a help.
The small size of the councils is another controversial point, because it leads to the lack of an adequate perspective when it comes to more wide-ranging problems, such as the renovation of barrios in the large cities, where 400 families, the maximum permitted by law, can hardly offer solutions to the basic problems of communities consisting of three or four thousand families. They might well prove an obstacle in the way of efficient and rapid solutions, given the need to mediate between different points of view and divergent interests. When one thinks of the possibilities of participation in decisions over regional, national or international policies, these forms of organization would inevitably remain isolated from them. Moreover the councils are hardly suitable for furthering a pluralist culture, tolerant of differences, because their small size and territorial identity tend to imply a degree of homogeneity.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

While the social dynamics of the revolution are characterized by their vital and open nature, in the sphere of politics, then, there appears to be a sort of regressive evolution, towards a closing of the space for participation and democratic decision-making. Venezuela, in this sense, appears to moving in the direction of a politically less democratic society.

The process which has led to the formation of the PSUV suggests the emergence of a new political system and tendencies towards the creation of a party-state, as we have known it in the failed socialisms of the last century, and as it continues to exist in Cuba and China. Currently, the government – without the least respect for the formal restrictions imposed by the law – uses public resources (money, public means of communication, etc.) togethert with the social organizations created by the missions, technical water roundtables, and urban land committees, etc., to promote and coordinate its party, the PSUV. The frontiers between state, government, PSUV and the communal councils tend to vanish, in a statist logic of twentieth century socialism. Complaints about this do not have much impact and lack the political capacity to force any change. These irregularities place the government in an advantageous position in relation to any other organization which hopes to compete for the votes of the Venezuelan electorate, seriously compromising the democratic principle of equality of conditions for competing in the political arena.

The declarations of the president in these first months of the year have accentuated a tendency already discernable during his first term: the concentration of decision-making, in all key matters affecting the future of the society, in the hands of the president and a small group of loyal followers who
depend on him. We can also observe how the suggestion that the communal councils represent a sixth state power, and their lack of links to the local governments as a result of their dependent relationship with the presidency, as currently proposed, would weaken the municipal structure of government, reinforcing a process of re-centralization which is also to be observed since the president’s first term. Equally clear, as we have seen, are the tendencies towards the subordination of the other state powers to an executive dominated by Chávez. This was evident when the representatives of these other constitutional powers were incorporated into the CPRC, into a sort of pyramidal structure in contradiction with the horizontal logic of separate and independent powers, which was one of the basic features of representative democracy in Venezuela hitherto. President Chávez has argued that these developments are necessary in order to open the road to a twenty-first century socialism, to a profoundly egalitarian and libertarian society; but if this implies a restriction of its political democracy, are the means compatible with the ends?

In the light of the failures of the socialist attempts of the twentieth century, in which the authoritarian nature of the state played a key role, the answer to this question may seem to be obvious. However, it is necessary to review certain arguments that constantly circulate in Venezuela as well as elsewhere.

As a justification for the actions he has taken, President Chávez refers regularly in his speeches to the danger to the revolution posed by imperialism, or more precisely by Bush’s government. With this argument, he stigmatizes those who do not share his ideas by making them responsible for debilitating and/or betraying the process and the country.

As is well known, high-ranking US officials knew about it and welcomed the 2002 coup d’état, and have been financing the organizations and leaders of Venezuelan opposition. However, it seems extremely improbable, after the successive and conclusive failures inflicted on the opposition by the government’s forces, that the United States can, in the short term, intervene successfully in Venezuelan politics in a way that would weaken Chávez. The opposition forces are too discredited and dispersed to represent a political alternative. A military invasion or intervention by the United States appears still less likely, bearing in mind the political weakening of the Bush government, both internally and internationally. An adventure against Venezuela, a country which, without being a major power, is not a banana republic either, does not seem to be viable in the short term. US troops and resources are already involved on several fronts in other latitudes. On the other hand, Venezuela enjoys today support and sympathy in Latin American regional institutions such as the Caricom, the OAS, Mercosur, etc., which also has the
effect of neutralizing US initiatives aimed at weakening Venezuela’s presence in those organizations.

It is therefore very difficult in Venezuela to accept that it is necessary to restrict criticism and join together behind Chávez’s personalistic power on the grounds that we would otherwise be assisting the enemy’s plans. It seems more reasonable to think that Chávez, with his military training and his admiration for Fidel Castro, prefers a centralized and personalized model, in the style of Cuba, for his socialist project. Some point out that this tendency towards ‘Cubanization’ is all the more absurd, at a time when some space for political tolerance is being opened in Cuba, rather than closed down.

Tendencies towards the concentration of power and political intolerance are inexplicable if conceived as a strategy for strengthening the revolution against powerful domestic economic groups. It is true that between 2001 and 2004 almost all the economically influential groups collaborated with the insurrectionary strategies of the opposition to overthrow Chávez, but due to the defeats they suffered, most of them have preferred to accommodate to the situation and, in times of prosperity, to look after their businesses. Only a few of the privately-owned media still practise politics actively. The behaviour of the Venezuelan tycoon Gustavo Cisneros, one of the richest businessmen in Latin America, the owner of a television channel in Venezuela, Channel 4, and a shareholder in many other businesses in the region, is illustrative. Cisneros backed the strategies of the opposition until the 2004 referendum, then admitted that he had lost a lot of money and came to an agreement with the president, distancing his television channel from political controversies.

It should not be forgotten that the Venezuelan state, as an oil state, has a long entrepreneurial tradition. As the owner of PDVSA, it is the most powerful business in the country. It is also the owner of most of the electricity companies, of the reservoirs and of mining companies such as Venalum and Bauxiven. The recent nationalizations are not really novelties: even more took place in the seventies, during the previous boom in world oil prices. Carried out by President Carlos Andrés Pérez, it was then called ‘state capitalism’. Until now Chávez’s compensation for nationalized companies has abided by the law and has been accepted as satisfactory by most of their owners. The same has occurred with the large estates that have been expropriated. Although the presidential speech that announces the expropriation measure is usually very aggressive, in practice the measure is always in accordance with the law and compensation is paid promptly. And to date, the banking sector and importers have enjoyed extraordinary profits.
One of the most prolonged confrontations against the Bolivarian project has come from the private mass media. In contrast to Cisneros, Marcel Granier, a Venezuelan businessman who owned Channel 2, and was founder of an ideologically neoliberal political group in the 1980s, was far less inclined to establish a dialogue with Chávez or to negotiate with the government after the referendum in 2004. In December 2006, in the context of the set of announcements about hastening of the process towards a socialism of the twenty-first century, President Chávez, speaking from an army barracks and dressed in military uniform, announced his unwillingness to renew Channel 2’s national licence which was due to expire on May 27, 2007. And he acted on this.

This gave rise to a complex situation involving various actors in various arenas acting from varied motives. In an already polarized society, it has made polarization worse. And this same polarization extends to the international sphere, where governments, political parties and mass media line up on one side or the other according to their interests.

By law, the Venezuelan state has the power not to renew a concession of space on the broadcasting spectrum. And the argument presented by the government that with this move it seeks to democratize the spectrum is also valid and fair, especially given its advocacy of the right to plurality and diversity regarding the mechanisms necessary for deepening participative democracy. Nevertheless, the lack of formal institutional procedure in the way Chávez made the announcement — military uniform, barracks, aggressive language, etc; the fact that on that same date Channel 4 was granted the renewal of its concession, having previously been as ‘pro-coup’ as Channel 2; his tendencies towards a personalistic concentration of power and intolerance of political differences in his new term; all this has given rise, since then and up to the time this essay is being written, to renewed polarized confrontations. It is not clear whether or not these have weakened Chávez politically, but surveys and opinion polls do show concern that this and other measures could contribute to those tendencies aiming at curtailing the right to freedom of speech.

These and other conflicts that have developed since the President’s announcement of the radicalization of the Bolivarian process make the situation open-ended and difficult to predict. Chávez continues to enjoy strong support and legitimacy, which suggests that he will continue with his strategy of accelerating as far as he can the process of change through a centralization and concentration of decision-making power in his own hands. But it is also true that the society’s organizational and participative dynamism, as seen both in those sectors allied to the president and in those of the opposition, may force him to rectify his practice in some aspects. Some actors,
such as the university students’ movement, began to mobilize at the end of May in order to express their dissatisfaction and demands in a less polarized way than in the past. Some new developments have also occurred within Chavism – for example, some of the pro-government political parties have rejected the presidential demand that they should join the PSUV without discussion, and have not dissolved themselves; and the President has himself stated that the constitutional reform may take more than a year before its definitive approval; all these facts can be seen as reflecting resistance to various presidential proposals.

Insofar as reforms and policies are opened up to the broadest participation of Venezuelans, they will guarantee greater viability, legitimacy and move in the desired direction. The better the procedures, the surer the attainment of the purposes of a better and deeper participative democracy.

NOTES


8 Ibid.


He also announced changes in the cabinet, with the exit of José Vicente Rangel, Jesse Chacón, Aristóbulo Istúriz and other key figures during his first term as president. No information was given about why these changes happened; they were the object of much comment as some of these ministers – Rangel, Istúriz – were key players to Chávez’s first period. None of the remaining or new ministers have the political status – i.e., the capacity to talk as equals with Chávez – of Rangel or Istúriz, or indeed Alí Rodríguez, who had also left the government a few months before.


Endogenous nuclei are territorial units where the government stimulates productive activities which are meant to take advantage of local socioeconomic, geographic and environmental conditions. The people or communities that establish such units receive various kinds of assistance from the government because they are supposed to be nuclei for the development of a new kind of socialist individual operating in a new kind of new economy. Until now they depend on government resources.


In fact, this principle had already been weakened as a result of the use of the so-called ‘morochas’ (identical twins) lists.

Jesús Rojas, Interview in Caracas, 28 November 2006.

