

THE VENEZUELAN PARADOXHeinz R. Sonntag¹

Paradox: “A statement or sentiment that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet perhaps true in fact.”

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What makes the situation in Venezuela, with its massive protests, strikes (the actual lasting more than four weeks), and partial stoppages of its decisive oil-industry against president Hugo Chávez during the last 18 months and his accusation as non democratic, seemingly contradictory with the origin of his regime (democratically elected by a broad margin)? This question goes to the essence of the actual crisis and comprises several elements that are hardly known or perceived by the international public opinion and knowingly hidden or silenced both by journalists and other writers of the “left” and by Latin American and Caribbean political leaders, even by politicians of the developed countries.

The first element is the most obvious and reiterated: Chávez is not the first and will certainly not be the last political leader who uses democratic procedures to seize power for non-democratic purposes, supposedly to “renew democracy” or to “establish a real democracy.” Without the intention of any analogies, just some prominent examples can be named: King Victor Emmanuel III had to appoint Mussolini prime minister of Italy in 1922 because a majority of the voters had given his party the strongest fraction in the parliament. Hitler became chancellor of the Weimar Republic in January 1933 because the voters, through their representatives in different parties, made possible a coalition, which obliged the president of the German Reich to nominate him. Vargas in Brazil and Perón in Argentina became presidents in 1934 and 1946 respectively because they

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conquered the masses' votes through their mobilization and organization. Chávez, a former Lieutenant Colonel who had tried twice to topple the Venezuelan democracy in 1992, once in February as the chief of an attempt of coup, the second time in November as an inspiring actor, based his campaign, as all the likes who preceded him, on the promise to solve all the existing problems of society, first of course those that worried the majorities: from poverty, unemployment, lack of adequate health, educational, house services, and **marginality**, till the democratic shortcomings, the failures of the socio-economic order, and the corruption. As his overall instrument he claimed a new Constitution for a "really participatory and protagonist democracy." This push toward **change** was well received by broad social sectors, including the working class of the modern economy (particularly the oil industry), the middle sectors, some segments of the bourgeoisie, and the **intelligentsia**, because of the deterioration of the socio-economic, political and socio-cultural climate during the previous – say – 15 years, very much like in the cases quoted above. Chávez reached a popularity of about 80 %.

A second element is more intricate: Chávez won not only the presidential election of December 1998 but also the following three referenda about the constitutional process during 1999 and finally his own "re-legitimizing" election in July 2000 "with overwhelming majorities," which is permanently presented as a proof of the absolute legitimacy of the regime. However, the results had a systematically muffled flaw: all of them implied a high abstention of the registered voters – 38 % in Chávez's presidential election, 62 % in the referendum about the convenience of a Constituent Assembly in April, 54 % in the election of its members in July, 56 % in the vote about the new Constitution in December and 54 % in the re-legitimation vote of July 2000. High voters' abstention figures do not necessarily destroy the legitimacy of a democratic regime, but they make it at least weaker and produce a curious mixture of rational and charismatic legitimacy (M. Weber), by focusing in the "popularity of the leader." This is particularly problematic in democracies that, like the Venezuelan, do not have a tradition of *civic culture* and of strong cohesive and consensual institutions. About half of the Venezuelan citizens showed thus little interest in, and actually did not vote for, Chávez's **Bolivarian Revolution** (although they expressed later their sympathy in the opinion polls).

A third aspect is structural and has several aspects. The exercise of political power by Chávez had, from the very beginning, some features, which tended, in the middle run, to question his popularity and consequently to threaten even more his democratic, though not charismatic, legitimacy. He polarizes the people in “friends” and “enemies” in an extremely aggressive manner, roughly along the divisions between the social classes, as he understands them (erroneously). The enemies are *the squalids* or *the oligarchy*, independently of their real socio-economic and political status; the friends are the *dignified*. This pattern is maintained from the very beginning of his political career, even during his campaign, and steadily reiterated in his Sunday allocutions after his victory (till now 132 with an overall duration of more than 1.000 hours).

He militarized the public administration by appointing active and recently retired military officers for practically all important positions, from ministers (few), vice-ministers (many) to officials in charge of “essential” programs (a lot) like the *Plan Bolívar*, a financially megalomaniac social plan.² He took over nearly all public institutions: the Supreme Court, the National Electoral Council, the Offices of the General Attorney and the Ombudsman, the state organizations for social policies, the Central Bank (= Federal Reserve), filling them with his allies, a trend that he tried to impose also to **civil society**, with reasonable success in the cultural institutions like museums, the national library, the two state owned publishing houses (*Monte Avila* and *Biblioteca Ayacucho*) and one TV- and several radio-stations, the arts schools, and the theaters, though with less or zero success in the trade unions, the major part of the Catholic Church, the autonomous universities, the entrepreneurial organizations and most of the mass media: they resisted this bringing into line of the *process*.

In addition, Chávez presented himself as “the candidate (and later president) of the poor”, but the economic and social policies of his government were and are basically those of previous governments and circumscribed to adjustment and neo-liberal measures, while

² For July 1999, the president had appointed more than 500 military personal of the little more than 600 designated till then.

his ideological and political discourse condemns them (and capitalism in general) as *savage*, *anti-humanist* and *exploitative*. This contradiction between *discourse* and *praxis* was, and is, accompanied and mirrored by a slowdown of economic growth and an increase of unemployment and poverty, the first from about 12 % to roughly 20 % in three years and the latter from about 48 to 67 %, in spite of high windfall profits in the oil business during 2000 and part of 2001 and thus the availability of funds that surpassed the foreseen state revenues in the budget of 2000 in 47 %.

The government of the Chávez regime has been, and is being, described as one of the most incapable, chaotic, and ineffective administrations in the history of the country since the conquer of its political independence more than 170 years ago. Since there is no internal coordination between the different governmental agencies and no external settlement between these and the different collective actors, the ship of the state runs in an eternal zig-zag without any clear course, subject to the arbitrariness of the decisions basically of Chávez and secondarily his closest “collaborators” (who often do not respect the Constitution of 1999). This **anarchy**, at least a partial consequence of the already mentioned militarization of the state apparatus, engenders a growing corruption, compared to which that of the “really existing democracy” till 1998 appears as a minor phenomenon. It is focused of course mainly in the high and middle ranked military officers with bureaucratic jobs. Scandals like the disappearance of about US-\$ 3.7 billion, destined to a macroeconomic stabilization fund, or the illegal use of currency exchange profits of the Central Bank, were neither investigated nor punished nor explained, since there is no real control of the state’s expenditure, being the comptroller and the chief of the Central Bank followers of Chávez. These are only a few examples, which throw lights on the nature of this curious “government.”

The national, regional and international defenders of the regime blame the hostility of the mass media for the broad resistance against the president. But this is only, as so often in this regime, one half of the truth. Chávez’s triumph in the elections of 1998 was actively and till enthusiastically celebrated by the mass media, **both by their owners and their journalists**, like by the majority of the population; as a matter of fact, he owed his

landslide victory largely to them. The president and his entourage had ample access to the TV- and radio talk shows and occupied the headlines of the written press. He was seen and thus presented as the incarnation of the so much desired political and socio-economic change. Practically during the whole constitutional process, from February 1999 till the re-legitimation elections of July 2000, the mass media were in favor of the government and its measures, although they made some criticisms against abuses, some policies and isolated scandals (which is, after all, one important function of the **published opinion**).

The way in which these criticisms were received created the first disappointments with the regime. Instead of giving some coherent explanations or accepting the wrongdoings, Chávez and his followers attacked the media, committing the additional error to personalize these attacks in certain journalists and media owners. Since the scandals became more and more frequent, the investigative journalism of the press and the audiovisual media, highly developed in Venezuela, insisted in trying to discover other scandals, irritating the government, particularly the president, and provoking him to increasingly aggressive attacks, as that of Chávez's sentences on the *anti-social mass media*. So a spiral was born, which escalated very quickly while the journalists published growing proofs of governmental gaffes, errors and deeds of corruption.

In these circumstances, it became growingly evident that the freedom of information and opinion became **formal**, that is to say without any real influence on the regime's measures and policies. It is the first time since 1958, the (re)establishment of democracy after the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, that the media see themselves deprived of any real influence on governmental policies and the dynamics of the political system, but experience their impotence. Briefly, the existence of a so-called press freedom was and is, at least in Venezuela, nothing more than a chimera, a kind of farce, which implements the government in its desperate attempts to demonstrate its "democratic" nature.

The state owned channel and radio station were, and continue to be, converted in a kind of "propaganda machines" à la Goebbels.

In the years of the worst deterioration of democracy, between 1980 and 1990, approximately, with the riots of the **Caracazo** around February 27, 1989, as its most emblematic expression, the dissolution of the internal social cohesion of the Venezuelan society had its peak. With the victory of Chávez in 1998, there was widespread hope that this state of **anomy** could be overcome by the changes he proposed. Nonetheless, his already mentioned aggressive political style and his tendency to conceive the political and social dynamics in the scheme of **friend-enemy**, much according to the theories of the political philosopher Carl Schmitt of the 20s, have made the reconstruction of a society impossible, based on the recognition of a set of rules that facilitate an orderly living together, even in conditions of (natural) controversies about the goals and characteristics of this order between the different collective actors. His polarizing the political (and social) society resulted in the opposition's polarizing, so that at the end no negotiation was feasible. Even the attempts of international organizations (OAS, UNDP, CARTER CENTER) to foster a negotiation climate have failed, mainly because Chávez and his government deny any concession to the opposition.

In addition, as if this situation were not sufficient, Chávez began to found in the whole country the *Bolivarian Circles*, neighborhoods and shanty-towns (**barrios**) groups for both the local organization of his allies and the defense of the **Bolivarian Revolution**. Although a few of these circles develop important community work, most of them are dedicated full-time to attack the political enemy. Investigative journalists have stated that the members of these latter circles are paid and armed by the government, and it is obvious that they attempt to intervene and fight the opposition's demonstrations, especially in the last months.

Briefly, the political polarization nurtured by Chávez, the incapability and inefficiency of his government, the tremendous corruption, the failure to accomplish his campaign promises, his policies in contradiction with his discourse, his trend to monopolize political and even social power, have finished ultimately by undermining his popularity and produced an unexpected result: those who say they don't abstain in the next election

or referendum, have decreased to less than 12 %. Since mid 2001, the resistance against the president grows steadily, practically in all sectors of the population. The first to express their resistance were the bourgeoisie and the middle sectors, in whose social circles Chávez had had a favorite place. When he tried to suppress the classical trade unions, he lost the support of the working classes, particularly when he attempted, once more via referendum, at the beginning of 2001, to eliminate the unions and to create a working class organization within the framework of his political party. In the last times, he is losing even the support of the poor, the soil of his “revolutionary” project. This explains the fall of his popularity from 80 to 27 %, among all the social strata, maintaining only in the lowest ones figures of about 30 % (although these same people doubt, in more than 60 %, that Chávez will solve their problems and that their future will be better).

This explains also the quantitative and qualitative growth of the opposition. It is a peaceful opposition, its demonstrations are big, frequent and powerful. Even the short ousting of Chavez in April 2002 is no proof of the opposition’s “violence”, since it is an episode that has not been cleared.³ The demonstrations have grown from some 100.000 in December 2001 to 1.2 million people during those of the actual strike, only in the nation’s capital. While it asked still at its beginning on December 2, 2002, for a consulting referendum (foreseen in his custom-made Constitution) on the convenience that Chávez remains president, it now asks for new elections.

Nevertheless, the last demonstrations were violently disturbed by members of the Bolivarian Circles, with casualties and numerous injured. Chávez threatens with the declaration of a **state of exception**. Till now he seems to control the armed forces, in spite of rumors about the growth of its institutional sector. So he has still the money (till when, with the oil strike?) and the arms (till when, with more and more discontent officers about their use for Chavez’s personal power project?).

³ It must not be forgotten that it was Chief General Lucas Rincón via TV who announced that Chávez had resigned. This allows the supposition that the so-called coup has a background that is still unknown. Remember also that until now not clear role of the president in the order to shoot against the demonstration, killing 18 people.

Venezuela is not (yet?) a dictatorship or a tyranny. But there is a notable discrepancy between the **formal** character of the regime and its **real** contents in terms of political practices and policies.

Like for any other paradox, there is no solution for the Venezuelan situation, except eventually the overcoming of the contradiction by the victory of one part or the other. But what seems clear is that the contradictory aspects will continue to be unknown or not perceived by the regional and international public opinion, basically because of two reasons. First, many members of the regional, North American and European “left” with influence in some media support and defend Chávez’s regime because of their absolute ignorance about what is going on in Venezuela or because their incapacity of thinking in a differentiated way or because of their obsolete ideological framework or even because they get money for what they write and say. The second reason is that many Latin American and Caribbean leaders, as well as politicians of the developed countries, have vested interests in hiding the authentic character of the situation, because recognize the possibility of questioning the discrepancy between the **formal** character of a regime and its **real** contents in terms of political practices and policies in a specific case could open the eyes of their peoples. And collectively open eyes are dangerous for the pretension to maintain the domination.

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