THE RADICAL POPULISM OF CHAVISMO IN VENEZUELA: A THROWBACK TO THE TRIENIO OF ROMULO BETANCOURT?

by Steve Ellner

The circumstances surrounding Hugo Chávez’s quest for power and the strategy he has adopted for achieving far-reaching change in Venezuela are in many ways without parallel in Latin American politics. While many generals have been elected president throughout the years, Chávez’s electoral triumph was unique in that he was a middle-level officer with radical ideas who had previously led a coup attempt. Furthermore, few Latin American presidents have attacked with such fervor existing democratic institutions while swearing allegiance to the democratic system (Myers and O’Connor, 1998: 193).

From the beginning of his political career, Chávez embraced an aggressively anti-party discourse. He denounced the hegemony of vertically based political parties, specifically their domination of Congress, the judicial system, the labor and peasant movements and civil society in general. Upon election in December 1998, he followed through on his proposed campaign slogan to use the Constituent Assembly as a vehicle to overhaul the nation’s neocorporatist political system. He offered to replace this model with one of direct popular participation in decision making at the local level. His actions and rhetoric, however, also pointed in the direction of a powerful executive whose authority would be largely unchecked by other state institutions. Indeed, the vacuum left by the weakening of the legislative and judicial branches as well as government at the state level, and the loss of autonomy of such public entities as the state oil company, could well be filled by executive-based authoritarianism.

From the outset of the presidential campaign in mid-1997, Chávez’s rivals harped on the threat his candidacy posed to the nation’s liberal democracy as part of a scare campaign without parallel in modern Venezuelan electoral politics. This negative characterization was reflected in articles published in the foreign press both before and after the elections. The president’s adversaries exploited his cordial relations with the Argentinian Norberto Ceresole, a self-proclaimed “advisor” and author of over a dozen books on politics. Declaring that democracy in Latin America had failed, Ceresole traveled to Venezuela following the 1998 elections in order to propagate the model of a strongman-led government underpinned by the armed forces, in the tradition of Egypt’s Gamal Abdal Nasser.

In many ways, Chavismo resembles the radical populism of the 1930s and 1940s which was represented in Venezuela by Rómulo Betancourt’s Acción Democrática. The radical populists opened up political institutions to non-privileged sectors, first promoting the formation of labor unions and then creating a neocorporatist structure in which worker leaders had a regular input in decision making. Similarly, Chavismo attempted to broaden participation under the slogan “participatory democracy,” which was a major goal of the constituent assembly, and it also reached out to non-privileged sectors.

A few scholars and prominent Venezuelan political analysts of distinct ideological orientations have argued that Chávez’s assumption of power forms part of a process of the weakening of democratic institutions throughout the continent. (1) Guillermo O’Donnell (1994) has labeled the recent strengthening of executive power in Latin America, at the expense of traditional democratic forms of interest aggregation and input in decision making, “delegative democracy.” Its salient features are “hyper-presidentialism,” charismatic presidential leadership (sometimes pejoratively referred to as “neopopulism”), reliance on executive decrees, use of plebiscites to legitimize authority, employment of anti-party rhetoric, and a discourse with messianic overtones. The scholarly literature written in this vein attempts to explain why, so
much time after the establishment and apparent consolidation of democracies in the 1980s, undemocratic features persist. The authoritarian thrust of these democratically elected governments is especially disquieting given the consistency of the U.S. commitment to democracy during the period, in accordance with global imperatives.

At first glance, Chávez’s rise to power is consistent with the trend toward the weakening of traditional political institutions in Latin America noted by O’Donnell. Chávez’s charisma is imbued with a messianic content, as put in evidence by his call for the “refounding of the republic.” In addition, his anti-party discourse is translated into attacks on existing political institutions, at the same time that he calls for direct citizen participation in the form of referenda, popular assemblies, and voluntary work in civilian-military programs. He attacks neocorporatist arrangements such as the Tripartite Commission of employee, employer and state representation and questions the legitimacy of the main labor confederation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela (CTV). In doing so, Chávez may be undermining the capacity of workers to resist IMF-style austerity measures. If this is his intention, then Chávez can be considered more adroit than his two elected predecessors, Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989-1993) and Rafael Caldera (1994-1999), who failed to generate the necessary political support for the pro-IMF policies they implemented, with disastrous political consequences for their respective parties.

Some of Chávez’s detractors and supporters point to a second future scenario, which contrasts sharply with the model of delegative democracy underpinned by powerful economic interests. According to these political analysts, Chávez’s movement is promoting far-reaching socio-economic changes, and in general a sharp break with the past. The Washington Post, for instance, called Chávez a “leftist agitator” while the New York Times characterized the measures taken by his followers in the Constituent Assembly as “Jacobin.” In the way of substantiating claims that Chávez is a leftwinger at heart, political commentators have drawn attention to Chávez’s trip to Cuba shortly after his release from prison in 1994 and again in 1999, where he spoke in public with Fidel Castro. More typically, political analysts label Chavez a “radical populist” and emphasize his pledges of sweeping reforms for nonprivileged groups. Chávez’s defenders also underline the radical thrust of his movement, but generally limit their discussion to the restructuring of the nation’s lethargic political institutions in order to incorporate popular sectors in decision making.

THE NATION’S NEW CONSTITUTION

Upon coming to power, both the Adecos of the trienio and the Chavistas prioritized the drafting of a new constitution. In both cases, elections for a constituent assembly were convoked and the constitution was approved after one year in power. Both documents created a centralized structure while envisioning reforms that would lead to novel models based on decentralization.

The “Bolivarian” Constitution of 1999 was not produced in a vacuum since proposals for a thorough constitutional change dated back ten years. An assorted group of intellectuals and political activists outside of the two main establishment parties formed the Frente Patriótico in 1990 which laid the groundwork for the institutional transformations that the Chavez government attempted to achieve. The Frente Patriótico’s call for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly (ANC) with unlimited powers stood in contrast to the efforts of Rafael Caldera who headed a bicameral congressional commission to reform the existing constitution. Due to the widespread discontent and protests following the February 1992 coup attempt, Congressmen urged Caldera to complete his 70-odd article reform immediately in order to shore up the legitimacy of the Pérez government. But when the pressure subsided in mid-1992, Congress
buried the reform proposal. A second opportunity was lost after Caldera’s election as president in 1993, when he named his constitutional advisor Ricardo Combellas to head the Commission for State Reform (COPRE) in an effort to prioritize the constitutional reform, and again Congress failed to seriously consider it. As a result, Combellas and other prominent establishment figures lost faith in Congress and swung over to the radical position in favor of the ANC with unlimited powers and without the participation of congressmen. Indeed, Combellas (who was elected to the ANC on the pro-Chávez ticket) and others attributed the nation’s woes to the excessive power of political parties and the National Congress, which served as their main bastion (Combellas, 1993: 27-29; 1998: xi). This view was upheld by some political scientists who labeled the Venezuelan political system a “partyarchy” in opposition to others who characterize it as “hyperpresidentialist.”

Considerable debate in the ANC centered on two basic propositions aimed at transforming the state. The first strengthened the executive branch and weakened Congress. The ANC (guided by its commission on the executive branch, headed by Combellas) created a unicameral congress, eliminated congressional input in military promotions and appointment of judges, and empowered the President to dissolve Congress under certain circumstances. In addition, the ANC extended the presidency from five to six years and allowed for immediate reelection. It also created the figure of a vice-president appointed by the president, thus discarding the proposal to balance presidential power with that of a prime minister. The second major area which the ANC concerned itself with was the model of participatory democracy embraced by the Chavistas. Along these lines, the new constitution allows for different types of referenda, including one in which citizens are able to remove elected officials. In addition, the constitution provides for popular election of Supreme Court judges and participation of civil society in the nomination of members of certain state bodies.

ORGANIZED LABOR

Chávez’s policy toward organized labor and his failure to make inroads within the movement contrasts sharply with Betancourt’s AD during the heyday of populism in the 1940s. Such a contrast reflects a fundamental difference between classical radical populism and “neopopulism” of the 1990s. The backbone of the former (parties such as AD and Argentine’s Justicialista party in the 1940s) was the labor movement whereas the latter enjoys greater support among the marginal classes.

As in other spheres, the threats and aggressive language on the part of the Chavistas, along with the demoralization of their adversaries, induced the AD-dominated CTV to make major concessions. Chavista labor leaders called for the dissolution of the CTV and in August 1999 introduced a resolution in the ANC which would have forced all confederation and federation leaders in the nation to step down and hold elections. The Chavistas also raised the possibility of investigating the origin of the personal wealth of Federico Ramírez León, president of the CTV. Ramírez León, secretary general Carlos Navarro, and other CTV leaders were particularly vulnerable due to the overwhelming defeat of their respective candidacies in the congressional elections of 1998. In another blow to the CTV, the Chávez government eliminated all union subsidies. At the same time, Chavista labor leaders called on the government to monitor union spending and establish a limit on the checkoff of union dues.

CTV leaders reacted to this offensive by holding an emergency congress for the purpose of approving new statutes. Most important, CTV President Ramírez León reversed his long-standing opposition to direct, rank-and-file elections for the confederation’s executive
committee. In the face of the demand by some Chavista labor leaders that the confederation’s elections be open to all workers including those of the informal economy, the CTV eliminated obstacles to the electoral participation of professionals, retired workers and the self-employed. While in the past, the CTV frequently blocked affiliation of non-AD unions, the new statutes established legal recognition by the Labor Ministry as the only requisite for joining the confederation. In an additional concession, the statutes granted the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) observers’ status in CTV elections and then, several months later, the confederation accepted that the CNE take complete charge of the process. Other reforms included the creation of a department in the CTV’s executive committee for retired workers, limiting the reelection of union officials to one term, and the holding of referenda on certain matters.

Polo Patriótico labor leaders were divided in their response to the CTV’s initiatives. The MASistas and other pro-Chavistas in the CTV favored accepting the challenge by participating in the confederation’s elections scheduled for May 2000. They pointed out that the new rules of the game and other circumstances opened the possibility of defeating AD for the first time since the confederation’s founding in 1947. In the first place, AD was losing its virtually absolute grip on the CTV. Five of the nation’s 23 state-wide labor federations had left the AD fold, three of which (Apure, Lara and Portuguesa) fell under the influence of the Polo Patriótico. Furthermore, the president of the public employees federation who aspired the CTV presidency under a reformist banner threatened to launch his candidacy outside of AD should the party endorse one of the confederation’s old-timers or their allies, whose ethical conduct had been seriously questioned. Finally, the CTV represented an estimated 2 million workers and thus could not be casually written out of any political strategy for labor. The alternative approach of organizing a new confederation was precarious since it ran the risk of becoming an “official” labor movement.

A moderate line within the Quinta República also questioned the hard liners assumption that CTV elections would be unscrupulously managed. The moderates insisted that all workers of the formal economy be allowed to participate, but were willing to accept the exclusion of those of the informal economy. They were encouraged by the receptivity of CTV President Ramírez León to their proposal for devising a list of voters consisting of all workers (regardless of union affiliation) who paid into the social security system.

The two main currents within organized labor reflected the hard and moderate lines within the Chavista movement as a whole. The former wanted to deliver a final blow to AD and saw the CTV as its ultimate bastion. The hard liners rejected participation in CTV elections because such a course implied enrolling new non-AD unions in the confederation, a process which would have fortified the confederation and contributed to its legitimation. The insistence of the hard liners that elections take in all workers of both the formal and informal economy reflected the fact that the locus of Chávez’s mass support was the “marginal” class and other unorganized workers, more than any other social grouping. The moderates, for their part, were encouraged by Chávez’s style which combined aggressive attacks and flexibility. They admitted that the threats to dissolve the CTV formed part of a strategy to wring concessions from the AD leadership in order to position the Chavistas to take control of the confederation by electoral means.

DISCOURSE

Many Latin American presidents in the 1990s have compensated for their weak organizational backing or their party’s lack of credibility by intensifying their presence on the national scene and projecting themselves as national saviors (Mettenheim and Malloy, 1998: 7-
Chávez was no exception as his makeshift Polo Patriótico alliance lacked strong roots in the population and was disunited. Indeed, his goal of engineering thoroughgoing change in the nation has historically required the vehicle of a tight-knit, ideologically committed political party with popular ties. Throughout his first year in office, Chávez maintained a high profile. His frequent TV appearances extended for hours, generally transmitted simultaneously on all channels. He also had a regular call-up radio program, “Hello President.” In addition, Chávez actively participated in the campaigns for the ANC and the ratification of the new constitution, thus breaking Venezuelan tradition of presidential neutrality in electoral contests. Finally, he traveled widely abroad where he made important pronouncements on foreign policy objectives which received considerable press coverage.

The discourse of populists is generally directed at nonprivileged sectors. While the radical populist parties including AD, APRA and the Justicialista party in the 1930s and 1940s attracted workers and organized them into unions, the neopopulists of the 1990s (such as Fujimori) appealed to members of the informal economy (Weyland, 1996; 1999: 182). Chávez fit this pattern in that he focused attention on the lot of the very poor at the same time that he and many of his followers express disillusionment at the passivity of the organized working class (Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 392). Unlike Chávez, however, the modern-day populists generally embraced neoliberalism, which was unconcerned with social inequality, and thus they stopped short of redistributive policies. In contrast, Chávez’s discourse included promises which pointed in the direction of winners and losers. Thus, for instance, he once stated that if his children were starving he would not think twice about committing robbery. He also affirmed that land squatters were exercising their legitimate right to the land. In making these statements, Chávez was indicating that for him the plight of the poor took priority over private property. Indeed, one of the main criticisms of business groups of Chávez’s proposed draft of the new constitution was its failure to guarantee, in no uncertain terms, the sanctity of private property (Gerente, 1999).

Chávez, in addition to promoting values such as social justice, humanism and patriotism, offered a new vision of the nation’s history. This interpretation served to justify the abrupt break with the past, as embodied in the constituent assembly, and Chávez’s harsh attacks against the parties that ruled Venezuela since 1958. For decades, Venezuelans dated the outset of the modern period to the death of long-time dictator Juan Vicente Gómez in 1935, or to the 1945 or 1958 revolts which brought AD to power. Venezuelans generally condemned all those who governed Venezuela between Bolívar’s death in 1830 and that of Gómez as ruthless, corrupt or incompetent. In contrast, Chávez’s reference to the past lent legitimacy to some of the nation’s nineteenth-century caudillos, at the same time that he questioned the negative characterization of the nation’s military tradition (Blanco Muñoz, 1998: 103). He dated the domination by a closed political elite with dubious ethical conduct -- pejoratively referred to as “partyarchy” -- not to the 1970s or 1980s as is generally done, but as far back as AD’s original advent to power in 1945. He also attacked such political luminaries as AD’s Rómulo Betancourt and the nation’s “pacted democracy,” which until recently was considered a model for Latin America.

CHAVISMO AFTER ONE YEAR IN POWER

A set of basic features, policies and circumstances distinguishes the movement headed by Hugo Chávez from other movements of change in Latin America in the twentieth century. The salient characteristics discussed in this article are:
1. From the outset, the MBR-200 consisted of middle level officers intent on creating a civilian-military movement; military officers continue to occupy prominent positions in the Quinta República party and the Chávez government.

2. President Chávez has counted on the solid backing of the Armed Forces.

3. After ten months in office, Chávez’s level of acceptance reached 80 percent. Chávez drew most of his support from non-privileged sectors of the population, particularly unorganized workers, while the middle class, which was evenly divided at the outset of his presidency, became increasingly alienated during the following months.

4. The Polo Patriótico was a makeshift alliance activated only for electoral purposes, while its largest party, the Quinta República, was organizationally and ideologically ill-defined.

5. The parties of the opposition lost all organizational vitality as a result of their poor showing in the December 1998 elections.

6. The Chávez government pursued an independent and activist foreign policy which included calls for the revival of the third-world bloc.

7. Chávez avoided anti-communist rhetoric and incorporated numerous leftists in his government and party leadership.

8. Chávez’s discourse stressed the plight of non-privileged sectors and envisioned zero-sum game situations involving the poor and members of the elite.

9. Chávez abandoned the statist economic model which he had originally embraced and accepted privatization in strategic sectors of the economy. Nevertheless, in contrast to neoliberalism with its blind faith in the marketplace, the Chávez government established certain national objectives for private capital to meet.

10. Chávez indicated to his followers that, in addition to radical institutional transformation, other battles lay on the horizon, implying that thoroughgoing economic change was on the agenda.

11. Chávez threatened his political adversaries with aggressive actions, but invariably he adroitly held out an olive branch in order to reach a compromise arrangement.

CHAVISMO IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Venezuela’s current political party system differs markedly from the heyday of radical populism. The radical populists were adept at establishing vertically structured, disciplined parties which were strongly linked to organized labor and other institutions. Their adversaries were also well organized and counted on the support of the armed forces, which eventually overthrew the radical populist governments. Both the radical populists and their opponents were able to call on large numbers of people to take to the streets around specific demands and grievances. While the union movement was incorporated into the structure of many populist parties, thus contributing to their organizational solidity, Chávez lacks influence in organized labor. The organizational underpinnings of Chavismo is tenuous, largely because he derives the bulk of his support from unorganized workers, particularly members of the informal economy whose numbers have increased sharply as a result of the economic contraction of the last two decades. The fragility of Chávez’s organized support is partly offset by the solid backing of the armed forces and the disorganization of the parties of the opposition. In addition, the mobilizations set in motion by Chavismo are less politically controlled: at any given moment, they may express support for the government, just as they may serve to undermine its authority. In this sense, the eventual outcome of the phenomenon of Chavismo is actually more uncertain than was the case with radical populism during its heyday.
In his seminal study of populism, Ernesto Laclau (1977) posited the largely unpredictable nature of populist movements. Laclau rejected the mechanical connection between populism and emerging capitalism, in spite of the anti-oligarchic thrust of both (Ianni, 1975). He claimed that analysis of populism’s “ideological discourse” was the key to ascertaining the direction of the movement. In order to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of populist movements, he attempted to refute the notion that populist leaders consistently manipulate the nonprivileged and the powerless (Germani, 1962). In the chapter on Venezuela in Latin America Between the Second World War and the Cold War, 1944-1948, this author used Laclau’s thesis to explain the intransigence of the opposition to the AD trienio government. Indeed, the Gallegos government was overthrown in 1948 not so much because of its radical reforms per se, but because of the radical thrust of the AD movement.

Some scholars have accepted Laclau’s general thesis while criticizing his emphasis on discourse. They argue that the long-term trends of populism are the result of its class makeup and the concrete policies and actions it undertakes, which determine and reflect this class support. In the way of example, David Raby points out that the socialist outcome of the populist movement in Cuba was made possible by its linkage to the spontaneous energy of the people in general, and to non-privileged sectors in particular. This orientation contrasted sharply with the dogmatic approach of the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Socialista Popular) which largely passed over popular culture and was unable to interpret popular sentiment (Raby, to be published).

In short, populist movements have a greater capacity to penetrate popular culture precisely because they are not bound to a solidified, inflexible doctrine. For this reason, their long-term direction is hard to predict. Nevertheless, the relationship between the movement’s organized vanguard and society provides a clue. This proposition is particularly applicable to Chavismo which was even more unpredictable than the radical populist movements. Not only was its ideology ill-defined, but its organization was tenuous. Specific aspects of the movement, however, point in a radical direction. In addition to discourse, the radical potential of Chavismo can be gleaned from an examination of the movement’s origins, policies and the role of political actors, as briefly discussed in this article. The formation of the movement during ten years of conspiratorial activity by non-elite members of the armed forces, its links to civilian leftists both before and after February 1992, and its encouragement of popular mobilizations all testify to its radical potential.

Upon being elected, the key task for Chávez was the creation of new institutional and organizational structures. With regard to the former, Max Weber’s celebrated theory that charismatic authority cannot sustain itself indefinitely points to the need to create a new institutional setting with new rules, as the ANC has set out to do. Creating this edifice, however, is only half of the challenge. At this point organizational weakness is Chavismo’s Achilles Heel. Without a cohesive organization it is hard to believe that the far-reaching, ambitious goals of their leaders will be achieved, regardless of the firmness of their commitment. If Chávez retains the solid backing of the armed forces and succeeds at organizational consolidation, the deepening of the process of change and even structural transformation will become a realistic possibility.
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