

ESSAY**Venezuela and the Challenge of a New Democratic Transition**

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The rise of popular peaceful movements such as the Movimiento Estudiantil Venezolano, which has to some extent filled the power vacuum left by the old opposition, has opened a new national dialogue between voters and those opposed to the centralization of power in the executive branch. At the same time we cannot neglect the international political economic context of Venezuela as an oil producing nation highly dependent on the price of oil for its stability. Therefore, the argument presented here is that the possibilities brought forth by the opening of this new national dialogue, accompanied by a shrinking budget due to falling oil prices, could in time prove to be significant enough to lead to an eventual “democratic transition” in Venezuela.

Introduction

Few countries are as polarized as Venezuela and few national leaders are as polarizing as Hugo Chavez. Chavez is very skilled in playing politics as theater, but in doing so he has not dealt with the social justice problems he campaigned to resolve in the first place. Corruption has remained rampant in the bureaucracy and clientelism continues to be widespread in his administration. It is undeniable that Chavez has established a strong connection with sectors of the Venezuelan population that had long been ignored by the traditional parties. And although for many Venezuelans, Chavez is the first President to represent their interests, by voting for Chavez they were not applauding his authoritarian moves to control all branches of government, restrict the freedom of the press or prosecute the opposition, but were instead voting for education, food and health care.

Venezuela's democratic transition¹ currently hangs on the line due to a power vacuum in the opposition, the cult of personality of Hugo Chavez that aided his efforts to

¹ Democratic transition: If we define democratic transition as a movement towards democracy from an authoritarian or semi-authoritarian form of government, and as the shift through which more people are able to participate in the political process through either direct elections or through their elected representatives, then we can infer that Venezuela is currently undergoing a reversal in the process of democratization. Even though Venezuela has been historically considered one of the bastions of modern democracy in Latin America because of their strong party system, it is also true that this system had unfortunately remained exclusively in the hands of the political elite excluding the vast majority of the population. Thus, Chavez' "Bolivarian movement," whose support came from people who had never been part of the political process, momentarily did play an

centralize power, and the ensuing political polarization and constitutional engineering (Giovanni Sartori) that followed. This has led Venezuela to become what Larry Diamond terms a *pseudodemocracy*. Venezuela's current political structure lends itself to the problem of *presidentialism* (Juan Linz) and the *Venezuelan Exceptionalism* (Ellners and Tinker Salas)². Nevertheless the rise of popular peaceful movements such as the Movimiento Estudiantil Venezolano, which has to some extent filled the power vacuum left by the old opposition, has opened a new national dialogue between voters and those opposed to the centralization of power in the executive branch. At the same time we cannot neglect the international political economic context of Venezuela as an oil producing nation that highly depends on the price of oil for its stability. Therefore, the argument presented here is that the possibilities brought forth by the opening of this new national dialogue, accompanied by a shrinking budget due to falling oil prices, could in time prove to be significant enough to lead to an eventual "democratic transition" in Venezuela.

Theoretical Background

Juan Linz in his influential essay, *The Perils of Presidentialism*, warns that presidentialism poses one of the biggest threats to a democratic transition. And argues that parliamentary democracies are a more viable alternative "parliamentarism provides a more flexible and adaptable institutional context for the establishment and consolidation of democracy" (Linz, 68). Here the two basic factors negatively affecting this presidentialist structure are a president's strong claim to democratic legitimacy and a fixed term in office. Presidentialism is problematic because it makes democratic politics a "zero-sum game." Linz explains that although presidentialism and a solid democracy are not necessarily opposites, having both work simultaneously is rather difficult to achieve since "heavy reliance on the personal qualities of a political leader—on the virtue of a statesman, if you will—is a risky course" (Linz, 69).

In *The Spirit of Democracy* Larry Diamond labels Venezuela's government as a *pseudodemocracy*. Diamond defines a *pseudodemocracy* as a system where "there are

important role in improving the quality of Venezuela's democracy. However, his continued efforts to centralize power have put these democratic advances at risk, reversing the country's movement towards democracy and turning it into what Larry Diamond terms a *pseudodemocracy* (see theoretical background below).

² The terms *pseudodemocracy*, *presidentialism* and *Venezuelan Exceptionalism* are explained in the "theoretical background" section of the present work.

regular, multiparty elections and other formal institutions of democracy like a national assembly, court system, constitution, and so on, but the people are not able to vote their leaders out of power because the system is, in effect, rigged” (Diamond, 23). Diamond notes that it is not until the defeat of the recall referendum in 2004 that the Venezuelan democracy was finally undermined. And that it was during this time that the institutions whose tasks were to balance power, were filled with Chavez’s supporters largely limiting the independence of all branches of government. This sudden increase in power of the executive branch in Venezuela led to the overarching control of most of the content of the nation’s media outlets by the government, restricting the freedom of information of the Venezuelan people. However, Diamond does believe that the process can be overturned specifically through support of good governance that includes the rule of law, security, protection of individual rights, and shared economic prosperity and free civic organizations.

Giovanni Sartori offers a different framework on analysis in his book Comparative Constitutional Engineering. In it, he warns against the manipulation of constitutions through national referendums as a tool of authoritarianism in a seemingly democratic context. “Latin American presidents do employ the referendum instrument as a means to circumvent parliamentary obstruction - either legally (the constitution empowers them to call referendums) or *de facto*” (Sartori, 165). He explains that a Constitution should serve as “a guarantee of liberty” and not just as an institutional and organizational framework.

Steve Ellners and Miguel Tinker Salas, in their essay *The Venezuelan Exceptionalism* discuss the idea of Venezuelan exceptionalism and how this view created a false confidence for Venezuela’s old political ruling class, and how it may also prove to be detrimental to Chavez’s vision of Venezuela. This view of exceptionalism sees Venezuela as a privileged nation, with a more advantageous position compared to many of its neighbors. The argument is that Venezuela’s richness in raw materials such as oil, natural gas, iron, diamonds, bauxite, plus and a strategic geographical location, which have given Venezuela a chance to participate in the global economy successfully. In addition to this the thesis of Venezuelan exceptionalism states that social mobility is greater in Venezuela than in other places. The problem with this perceived exceptionalism is that it “consisted of half-truths,

misconceptions, and fallacies from the beginning and proved largely incapable of providing an adequate interpretation of the complexities of Venezuelan history” (Ellners et al, 6).

Puntofijismo: Birth, Endurance, and Decline of the Two Party System

Venezuela has historically proven that it can rise above authoritarianism and populist rhetoric. In 1958, the opposition in Venezuela successfully brought a democratic transition to the nation, forcing the resignation of Dictator Perez Jimenez (Camejo). In a historic move, the three main centrist parties, *Accion Democratica* (AD), the *Partido Social Cristiano de Venezuela* (COPEI) and the *Union Republicana Democratica* (URD) along with the Catholic Church, the Communist party and even some military officers, united to revolt against the dictatorship. Afterwards Admiral Wolfgang Larrazabal assumed the leadership of a Junta that promised to hold elections in December 1958. The winning coalition signed a social pact known as the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* and *La Declaración de Principios y Programa Mínimo de Gobierno*. The *Pacto de Punto Fijo* was a consensual governability agreement by the leaders of Acción Democrática, COPEI and Unión Republicana Democrática. The *Declaración de Principios y Programa Mínimo de Gobierno* constituted a basic governability agreement designed by the three political parties (España & Civit). This *puntofijismo* system is what ultimately set the framework for Venezuela’s transition to democracy.

However, the argument is that this period of democratic transition evolved over the years into a system of centralized power for the ruling class and an increasing disengagement of the political elite from the masses. From 1973 to 1993 a two party system emerged, where the two major parties: Accion Democratica and the COPEI became dominant, meaning that with or without coalitions they individually achieved 22%-50% of the total national vote, winning all Presidential elections. Thus, the main political actors throughout much of the democratic transition have been Accion Democratica (a social democratic party) and the COPEI (the Social Christian Party of Venezuela) while other parties have been either short-lived personalistic vehicles or have been permanently marginalized in minor party status (Martz).

The decline of the *puntofijismo* system began shortly after the results of the 1988 elections gave Carlos Andres Perez (AD) the win with 52.89% while his nearest contender Eduardo Fernandez (COPEI) registered 40.40% of the vote. A decline in oil revenue

(Blanco, 91) and the political economy of the new administration resulted in social and political upheaval including riots, martial law and a general strike, in which an estimated 300 to 2,000 people were killed. "Riots exploded in 19 cities, involving in Caracas alone 500,000 to 750,000 people" (Schuyler, 15) A rise in the gap between the rich and the poor accounted for the loss of legitimacy of the Venezuelan system "the extremes of wealth and poverty intensified dramatically-from 1988-1991 the share of national income going to the richest 10% of the population skyrocketed from 30.3% to 43% while the share going to the poorest 10% fell from 2.3 to 1.8%"(Schuyler, 13).

In 1992, 120 people were killed in two attempted coups, the first was led by then Colonel Hugo Chavez, and the second was carried out by his supporters (BBC, Timeline: Venezuela). As a result Chavez was jailed for two years before being pardoned. The disenchantment and disapproval from voters concerning the ruling political parties was further evidenced in the December 1992 municipal and state elections. Characterized by low voter turnout the results showed losing ruling AD party lost eight of its 20 posts (Britannica). In 1993, the corruption of the dominant political class reached its peak, after President Carlos Andres Perez of the Accion Democratica was ousted on grave charges of corruption by the National Assembly.

During the 1993 national elections as distrust over the political elite further increased, support for the AD and COPEI dropped to its lowest levels, under 23% respectively. Moreover an August 1993 poll cited that 61% of respondents identified themselves as independents (Latin American Monitor, August 1993, 1187.) On December 1993 Rafael Caldera, a former founder and leader of COPEI, and the candidate of the newly founded Convergencia Party (a coalition of many small leftist parties) was elected president with a slim plurality, winning 30.46% of the total vote. While his closest contenders, Claudio Fermin of the AD took only 23.60% and Osvaldo Alvarez Paz (COPEI) taking 22.73%, closely followed by a fourth contender- Andres Velazquez of the LCR with 21.95% (CNE). In 1996 the corruption scandal of the political elite continued to escalate when ousted president Carlos Andres Perez was imprisoned after being found guilty of embezzlement and corruption. The political defeats of the new government added to the crisis as the economic and social plans of the Rafael Caldera administration largely became

failures (Trenado, 104), “Venezuela sits on the biggest oil reserves outside the Middle East, but about 80 percent of its 23 million people are poor”(Cayazzo). The socio-economic reality of Venezuela, and the growing inequality that had taken root in the system, proved to be politically devastating for the ruling class.

In 1997 former coup leader Hugo Chavez Frias announced the formation of his party, the *Movimiento Quinta Republica*, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), and his candidacy to the 1998 Presidential election. Chavez ran on an anti-corruption and anti-poverty platform and against the “corrupt” political elites of AD and COPEI that had dominated Venezuelan politics since 1958. His campaign had two basic principles: abolishing Venezuela's old political system of *puntofijismo*, and opening up political power to independent and third parties. He did not align himself with a socialist or communist ideology, describing his ideology as humanistic. He also did not directly attack the United States as an enemy of Venezuela, but instead favored diplomatic relations with the United States. Chavez also promised to end corruption and eradicate poverty in Venezuela. In May of that year Chávez registered 30% of public support for his candidacy in public opinion polls, and by August he was registering 39% (McCoy & Trinkunas, 49).

In an effort to retain power, the leading parties (Accion Democratica and COPEI) formed a coalition with other minor parties to face the 1998 elections against Hugo Chavez. The effort proved to be too little and too late, the coalition lost the presidential election. On December 1998 Hugo Chavez was elected president of Venezuela. And his party, the MVR, with the support of a coalition of smaller parties took control of the National Assembly. The results were as follows: Hugo Chávez was elected to his first term as President of Venezuela with the largest percentage of the popular vote (56.2%) in four decades, with 63.76% of voter participation (CNE). The runner-up Henrique Salas Romer of the Proyecto Venezuela Party, the coalition party of AD and COPEI, came in second registering 39.97% of the vote. And the third prominent candidate of the elections, Irene Saez registered only 2.82% of the vote (CNE).

Socioeconomic Context

The phenomenon of Chavez brought forth much talk about the political division of Caracas, evident in the geographic east- west fault lines. Because in the west there are largely impoverished slums and in the east is where the more affluent *Caraqueños* reside (Hellinger). This allowed Chavez to frame his discourse in a communist-socialist argument of the “rich versus the poor”. Since the east’s communities were officially categorized as temporary “invasions” of public land, the slum areas of Caracas rarely received any city services. Fundamental living necessities such as water and electricity were for the most part non-existent in these areas. The large income gap within the city of Caracas, reflects a portrait of a country where some 85% of the population live in cities. Expressing through their vote displeasure with their socioeconomic circumstances Chavez’s supporters grew determined to make their voices heard. This is what professor Daniel Hellinger describes as “a desire for social inclusion.” In contrast those in the opposition feel that Chavez’s policies exclude them from the world economy.

Gaining Legitimacy through Elections

Under the mandate of the new Venezuelan Constitution, which Chavez and his party had proposed and ratified in 1999, Chavez called for a new election of all public offices. What became known as the “*megaelection*” sought to legitimize the president and his party; and ultimately establish sufficient power to make the changes necessary for the new fifth republic of Venezuela (Cayazzo) the mega-elections were characterized by an initial chaos mostly due to the logistic demands of holding such a monumental vote. Initially scheduled for May 28, 2000, the elections were finally held on July 30, 2000 (Gil & Prado). In the presidential elections, Chavez’s main challenger became Francisco Arias Cardenas. Cardenas’ lack of ties to the traditional political parties, proven experience as governor, and moderate discourse of modernization and decentralization were seen as a powerful threat to Chavez’s left-leaning populism by the opposition, “eight years ago, both men were left-leaning army officers who staged a failed 1992 military coup that Chavez led. But today, they are bitter enemies” (Cayazzo). The results of the megaelections were decisive with Chavez and the MVR winning massive victories. Chavez won another 6 years in office. The Megaelections served their purpose, legitimizing the power of Chavez and his supporters in all facets of government at both the federal and state levels. The results of the

Megaelections were as follows: Hugo Chavez won the elections with 59.76 percent, while his nearest challenger, former Zulia state Governor Francisco Arias Cardenas, received 37.52 percent. A total of 11,720,660 votes were cast accounting for 56.63% of all registered votes (CNE). The MVR obtained 18 out of 23 governorships, and more than two thirds of the national assembly seats (CNE).

The Opposition: The Old Political Class

More than one year later on November 2001, Chavez introduced 49 new laws, which did not require the ratification of the National Assembly, including radical reforms to the oil industry and land reform laws (BBC, Timeline: Venezuela). On February 2002, with the intent to act upon these he replaced the Board of Directors of the state-owned oil company PDVSA, giving rise to an internal political crisis that lasted for several months. On April 11, 2002 in one of the largest general strikes against President Chavez, violence broke out and some 10 people were reported dead. The following day a military and popular coup, announced the supposed resignation of Hugo Chavez. The coup would last only briefly as Chavez's supporters took to the streets demanding the return of their elected leader. Two days later on April 14, 2002 Chavez triumphantly returned to power and condemned those plotting against him. The failed 2002 coup against Chavez, allowed him to legitimize his rule and target the opposition as "undemocratic" and as "enemies of the state" and its people.

But the opposition remained determined to remove Chavez from power, and moved to use democratic channels to achieve their means. Petitioning a national referendum to end Chavez's term early while continuing to take over the streets in protest, their efforts to hold a national referendum lasted more than two years, and although Chavez's administration initially blocked their efforts; they finally decided that a possible win could mean enormous political capital for Chavez. The referendum on Chavez's rule was finally held on August 2004, and although the opposition mobilized their supporters, Chavez's militant organization of supporters proved to be much stronger than that of the opposition. Chavez won a resounding victory, with the NO recall vote winning close to 59% of the total vote, and with a substantially high voter turnout, nearly 70% of the electorate (CNE).

The 2006 Presidential Campaign

Hugo Chavez has proven to be one of the most effective political campaigners today. During a February 19, 2006 telecast on his weekly show *Alo Presidente*, Chavez made clear his willingness to remain in power indefinitely (Alvarez). Chavez ran for his third term that same year. And even before the opposition agreed on a challenger, a number of polls in 2005 already favored a win by President Chavez. Polling firm Alfredo Keller and Associates gave Chavez a 55% majority of most likely voters, whereas the sum of the support for the opposition parties (AD, COPEI, PV, MPJ, ABP, UNT, and LCR) was just 14 percent. Some of his early contenders included, Roberto Smith (a right wing, mathematician by trade), Julio Borges (of the MPJ, lawyer by trade) Teodoro Petkoff (center-left, economist, journalist, and former guerrilla leader), William Ojeda (a former Chavista), and former Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales. Rosales had openly supported the 2002 coup attempt against Chavez, while Borges and Ojeda participated in demonstrations and popular upheavals in 2002 and 2003. Petkoff on the other hand had condemned the coup, and proposed democratic ways out of the crisis.

The 2006 Presidential campaign was framed by Rosales as a battle between democracy and dictatorship and by Chavez as a battle between socialism and capitalism. Chavez's speeches and his campaign were directed to his followers and not towards the estimated 20% or more of the population that was undecided. His focus was on undermining the United States rather than his challenger Manuel Rosales. Chavez's campaign slogans exhorted voters to "Vote against the devil, vote against the empire." His main platform continued to be the "Socialism of the 21st Century" based on the principles of the common good, social production (collective prosperity) and direct participation in democracy. For his followers Chavez became a cult-like figure, a rock-star of sorts even singing his own campaign songs and slogans.

Venezuela in contrast to many other Latin American countries has no restrictions on the amount of money the government may spend on publicizing itself. Chavez used this to his full advantage, using his television show and publicly paid billboards to showcase his government's positive progress. During his campaign he inaugurated a large number of public works projects; using every opportunity to head massive rallies across the country. On the final stage of the campaign, on Thursday November 30th, two days prior to Election

Day, Chavez conceded an interview of more than three hours to two journalists from the private media, Televen and Venevision. The interview grasped the strength of Chavez's campaign; his charisma and informal conversational tone that allow a large percentage of the electorate to relate to him and his message versus that of the opposition.

Prior to his run for office Manuel Rosales, the opposition candidate was the state governor of Zulia and former mayor of the oil-rich city of Maracaibo. He represented a highly personalistic party, a New Era (Un Nuevo Tiempo), which was later supported by 42 political parties forming the coalition of the opposition. Because the coalition was created too late into the campaign, the opposition gave Chavez an unnecessary advantage: time. Rosales' campaign strategy focused on the fact that crime under Chavez had increased dramatically and condemned Chavez for spending too much time and capital abroad. Even though Rosales represented the opposition's condemnation of Chavez's populist politics, like Chavez he also attempted to offer tangible solutions for social inequality. His main proposal was a debit card, called "Mi Negra," that would tap oil revenues to give \$300-\$1,000 a month in cash to Venezuelans in the lowest income levels. His proposal backfired as many considered the opposition's claims that Chavez was a populist hypocritical. Jesus Sanchez, 62, an industrial mechanic shared this view "That deceitful offer of money without working — that Negra card — it's shameless populism that can't be compared to the benefits we're currently receiving" (Gould). Rosales and his supporters also staged massive public rallies; among the most memorable was the "Avalancha de Caracas."

Chavez was widely favored to win the re-election, but was intent on further legitimizing his rule by pushing for a 10 million strong vote from his supporters out of an electorate of some 16 million eligible voters (CNE). Under the slogan "*uh! ah! Chavez no se va*" (uh! ah! Chavez is not leaving) the Chavistas pushed for the re-election of Chavez for the third time. The success of his campaign was not only his use of patronage but most importantly political mobilization. Community councils organized the population, in the same model that was used to mobilize the "NO" -pro Chavez vote during the recall referendum in 2004. Chavez's supporters organized, dividing campaigners into commandos, battalions and platoons to mobilize voters on Election Day. Known as the UBE (Unities of Electoral Battle) these campaigners guaranteed not only a win, but a massive turnout. Chavez exhorted his campaigners to "be an army, whose commandos, battalions

and platoons do combat day and night until we reduce our opponents to rubble and dust!"(Alvarez, 51).

Political unrest was evident the week before the elections; People did not want to take any chances: Venezuelans stocked up on food and supplies and withdrew cash from the banks. On Sunday December 3, 2006 polling stations opened at 6:00 a.m., the massive turnout forced stations to close at 5:00PM an hour later than scheduled. 11,118 automated polling places were equipped with multiple high-tech touch-screen direct-record electronic voting machines or DRE. After the vote was cast, each machine printed out a paper ballot, which was inspected by the voter and deposited in a ballot box. Minor irregularities were reported by international observers and Rosales' camp, these referred to the early closing of some voting booths and the reopening of already closed centers. With a population of 27 million and 16, 026 million electors, voter turnout registered at 74.69% and abstention totaled 3,994,380 or 25%. 11,790,397 votes were counted out of which 11,630,152 (98.64%) were valid. Although there were 22 presidential candidates, only two- Chavez and Rosales, managed to get above 1% of the vote. With a coalition of 24 political parties, the election results gave a commanding victory to Hugo Chavez with 62.84% of the vote (7,309,080 votes.) While the coalition of 42 political parties represented by Manuel Rosales received 36.9% or 4,292,466 votes (CNE).

Among the 23 states and the independent district, Chavez obtained large majorities surpassing the 60% mark. The only exceptions were Merida where the results were much closer (53.78% v 45.98%), Tachira (51.13% v 48.6%), and Zulia (51.38% v 48.45%) all located on the western coast of Venezuela. Nueva Esparta and Miranda also signified fairly close victories for Chavez, with 58.54% v 41.22% for the opposition and 54.95% v 44.80% respectively (CNE). Caracas registered very similar numbers to the national results, with 62.74% in favor of Chavez and 36.92% in favor of Rosales. That same night Manuel Rosales conceded the election to Chavez: "We recognize that today they defeated us" (El Universal, Chávez reelegido con 61% de los votos). Following his win, Hugo Chavez disbanded the official Fifth Republic Movement Party, the MVR, to found the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, the PSUV, a coalition of all pro-Chavez parties.

A New Opposition: RCTV and the Movimiento Estudiantil Venezolano

The opposition had up to this point both considered and been involved in a few different strategies to attain their ultimate goal, removing Chavez from office. The “*brazos caidos*” faction advocated organizing non-violent street protests, following the clause of the Venezuelan Constitution which calls for peaceful disobedience. On the other hand, the “*Guarimba*” movement led by Robert Alonso, calls for public chaos and non-peaceful mobilization. A third option favored by the radical opposition involves *Magnicidio*, assassinating the head of state. However, the most plausible approach for the opposition is to continue to seek Chavez’s removal through democratic means; use politics to capture the support of the popular vote (Kozloff). The power vacuum within the old opposition has made this task nearly impossible, but surprisingly a new less radical opposition has emerged in Venezuela.

Chavez’s apparent strength in Venezuela has lately shown some weaknesses. The President’s meddling in the closing of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV) increased the number of undecided voters and partially diminished his support. On a May 20, 2007 *Hinterlaces* poll, RCTV was identified by respondents as the most frequently viewed channel with 43.7% followed by Venevision with 20% . The top news program was the “Observador” broadcast on RCTV with 41.5% describing it as such, while Noticiero Venevision followed in popularity with 18.4%. When asked what news program viewers considered more objective “El Observador” once again took the top spot with 35% of the total response. Favorite opinion program also went to RCTV with 27.3% for “La Entrevista.” Overall 80% of respondents were in disagreement with not renovating RCTV’s license.

Support for RCTV (Radio Caracas Television) has remained clear from the beginning, with slogans such as “*todos tenemos que luchar*” (we all have to fight) and “*RCTV somos todos*” (RCTV is all of us). This overwhelming support for RCTV from all segments of society proved to be one of the most important issues against Chavez during the December 2007 referendum which among other measures proposed extending the presidential term and abolishing restrictions on re-election. It also proposed making recall referendums more difficult, assigning the president the right to make emergency laws,

giving Chavez's control of the central bank, and letting the president designate civilian "development regions" and military regions with direct control of their governance (Young-Bruehl). The referendum proposed a total of 69 articles to the 1999 Constitution, which Chavez claimed needed to be reformed in order to continue implementing the "Socialism of the 21st Century" in Venezuela.

While earlier protests against Chavez and his government were staged by business leaders and members of the former ruling class; the peaceful protests in favor of RCTV represented a change, as these were largely led by construction workers, office workers and most significantly university students from both private and public schools. The student movement specially proved to be one of the key factors in the defeat of Chavez on the December 2007 Referendum. The *Movimiento Estudiantil Venezolano* (Venezuelan Student Movement) was a student coalition movement from Venezuela's largest academic institutions. And that unlike the opposition who had focused on mystifying Chavez as the root of all evil, the students defended a platform of national reconciliation and the protection of the civil rights of all Venezuelans (El Universal, La Furia Estudiantil). Some of the movement's young leaders included Stalin Gonzalez, a 23 year old student at the Central University of Venezuela, Yon Goicoechea a 23 year old law student at the Andres Bello Catholic University and Douglas Barrios a 22 year old economics student from the Metropolitan University.

The non-partisan student movement effectively provided a viable alternative response to the establishment. The student movement achieved broader support by acknowledging the mistakes of the opposition and by arguing not against Chavez as a political figure, but against his politics which they described as a threat to the basic human liberties of all Venezuelans.

The 2007 Referendum was characterized by a low voter turnout, with a 44% abstention rate. The 69 reforms were divided into two blocs, those directly sponsored by the office of the President and those sponsored by the National Assembly. Both blocs lost to the NO vote, which won with 50% and 51% respectively (CNE). Although the results showed only a narrow win for the opposition, the defeat of Chavez demonstrated that his hold on power could be shaken.

The high abstention rate, as compared to previous elections shows that Chavez lost many of the soft core supporters that led him to victory in prior elections. Nonetheless, the opposition's challenge continues to be designing and constructing a campaign that can transform those newly undecided voters into votes for the opposition. In other words, the next campaign will be the opposition's to win and not Chavez's to lose.

Changing Laws and Regulations

Venezuelan politics are clearly defined by the changing laws and regulations that define the electoral system and therefore the concentration of power in government. This brings forth what Giovanni Sartori terms "Constitutional Engineering." In essence the challenge for the opposition in Venezuela is that it cannot run a regular political campaign, because of the authoritarian nature of its current leader. And the consequential power he holds over all branches of government and the media. Chavez is a sophisticated politician who is media savvy. He has relied on television, newspapers and radio to communicate his message and assert his perception of reality over that of others.

Venezuela's electoral laws are constantly changing, upon a short time after his third re-election President Hugo Chavez proposed a national referendum to change the presidential re-election provision to indefinite re-elections. Although this measure has been repeatedly defeated, he has threatened to continue to pursue indefinite terms. Such a measure would substantially threaten the democratic system of government of Venezuela, and slip it further into authoritarianism. Furthermore, on January 2007 the Venezuelan National Assembly granted Chavez a presidential decree that endowed him with sweeping powers for 18 months (BBC, Timeline: Venezuela), assuring that the concentration of power will lie within the executive branch of government, with little or no "checks and balances" from the legislative or judicial branches. Jeopardizing the notion of separation of powers described in the Constitution.

We must remain assured that the rules and outcomes of all of the elections and referendums since 1999 have and continue to be outlined by the Constitution of 1999. President Hugo Chavez scheduled two elections for July 1999, including a national referendum and elections to fill a new constitutional assembly. The referendum passed

with a 72% "yes" vote, creating a Constitutional Assembly. Where the pro-Chávez coalition party *Polo Patriótico* obtained 120 out of the total 131 seats. It is this Constitutional Assembly that drafted the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution, which included important changes mainly in the electoral system, including an increase in the presidential term, establishing the new National Electoral Council (CNE), a new presidential two-term limit, and a new provision for presidential recall elections. There were also several structural changes expanding presidential powers, and converting the National Assembly from a bicameral into a unicameral legislature. Additionally it outlined the merit-based appointments of judges, and the creation of the Public Defender, an office authorized to regulate the activities of the presidency and the National Assembly. This new Constitution was ratified in December 1999. Since then the electoral context and governing mechanics in Venezuela have been and continue to be shaped by Chavez and his party (Caballero).

Under the laws and regulations of the 1999 Constitution, the president is elected by popular vote to serve a 6-year term which is renewable once. In the National Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional*), 65 members are elected through a party-list proportional representation system and 99 by plurality vote in single- and multi-member constituencies (68 in single-member and 31 in multi-member constituencies). Three seats are reserved for the indigenous peoples of Venezuela. And all members serve 5-year terms. Venezuela does not have compulsory voting since 1993 and ended the Presidential appointment of Governors in 1989, since then governors have been elected by popular vote.

Chavez has used his political clout to dramatically increase the electorate and change the electoral laws. The CNE is now a separate branch of government, parallel to the executive, legislative and judicial branches and is currently headed by Chavez's supporters. The 1998 Organic Law of Suffrage and Political Participation, passed before Chavez took office, recognized that one of the major electoral problems was fraud and required that elections be conducted with electronic voting machines. Under Chavez's administrations there has been a focus on increasing the number of voting centers throughout the country especially in low income urban and rural communities. During the August 2004 Referendum there were 8,279 voting centers. By December 2005, when the last legislative elections were held, the number of centers had reached 9,271. For the 2006 elections the CNE had 10,500 voting centers up and running.

Another important change to the electoral context was Mission Identity, *Mision Identidad*, initiated on October 2003, and carried out with the help of the National Office of Identification and Immigration (ONIDEX), Mission Identity aimed to implement article 56 of the 1999 Constitution. It was a massive citizenship and get out the vote campaign, that gave millions of people in Venezuela national ID cards granting them full citizenship. In 2003 and 2004, over eight million people received either new ID cards or updated their old ones. An additional 10 million were benefited from 2005 to July 2006. Consequently over 5 and a half million Venezuelans registered to vote for the first time and over 600,000 immigrants who met the new conditions for naturalization were granted Venezuelan citizenship.

The hope for the opposition is that it has become increasingly difficult for leaders who claim to be democratic to ignore the will of the people. It is clear that Venezuela faces a complicated future. Chavez has become a polarizing factor not only in Venezuela, but throughout the region. Regionally, Hugo Chavez is clearly the leader of the new radical leftist wave in Latin America, openly backing candidates in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru and Mexico without any regard for the different internal characteristics of each country. A big percentage of the population in Venezuela supports democracy and is doing as much as possible to be part of a positive change. But the increasing concentration of unchecked power that Chavez is amassing threatens to retard this effort with dangerous consequences for the country.

Venezuela is currently a wealthy state; the high prices of oil that were in place until the last quarter of 2008 allowed Chavez to implement his Bolivarian revolution not only in Venezuela but also regionally. He has had the power of the purse, and has used it effectively to appeal to voters. But relying on a single product to sustain the economy is a double edged sword. If oil prices continue to decline, Chavez will be unable to continue funding all of his programs and the people could turn restless. Venezuela like any other country in the world must diversify and offer real tools for their people to compete in the global economy. On an interview prior to his election in 1998, Chavez himself mentioned that socialism, and closed economies, was a thing of the past, and that Venezuela must improve its competitiveness. But Chavez has so far failed to bring real solutions to the people of Venezuela, recklessly spending oil revenues at home and abroad.

Conclusion: The Challenge of a New Democratic Transition

In conclusion, the failure of Chavez's government to deliver on its promises and the persistent deterioration of living conditions may wear down his popularity and lead to a more volatile political situation in Venezuela. The message of the opposition should be one of unity and reconciliation. Latin America has seen a successful revert from authoritarianism to democracy in the past three decades. In Chile the Coalition of Parties for Democracy, Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia, defeated Augusto Pinochet, by uniting and offering a positive message "La alegría ya viene" ("Joy is coming"). In Peru, Fujimori was finally ousted by political campaigning and investigative journalism that uncovered illicit transactions and human rights violations. Nicaragua also experienced such a change, when the National Opposition Union (UNO) coalition won against the incumbent regime of Daniel Ortega in 1990, the UNO's ability to choose the "right" candidate, allowed them to sell a winning message of national reconciliation and change to the people of Nicaragua.

The future of Venezuela remains uncertain; conversely it is clear that the results of the November 23, 2008 elections provided the first significant, albeit narrow, win for the opposition in Venezuela. The election of 22 governors, 2 metropolitan mayors, and other local officials for four-year terms (CNE), resulted in what would appear to be a victory for Chavez's PSUV party, since they won 17 of the contested governorships. However, with 65% of voter turnout, the opposition achieved an important victory by winning governorships in three of the most populous states including Miranda and Zulia as well as the mayor's office in the heavily populated Caracas. Although Chavez peacefully accepted the results of the elections as a "triumph of democracy" and as proof of the consolidation of democratic maturity in Venezuela, he also encouraged his supporters to continue fighting for the revolution cautioning the opposition against taking this triumph as the "final triumph". Once again Chavez was alluding to his basic argument that the opposition might have won a battle but that by no means have they won the war.

In order to capitalize on their success, the opposition must continue to reform itself, as it did during the 2007 Referendum. And offer areal plan to construct a better government than the current one. The opposition needs to learn from past elections and

not only recognize but also understand why Chavez enjoys the degree of public support that he does. Finally, the opposition can compete for the allegiance of the poor and the lower middle class, but first it must follow the leadership of the student movement and make an effort to recognize their own past mistakes and offer viable alternatives for the larger majority.

The current political, social and economic reality of Venezuela continues to baffle those who in past decades hailed Venezuela as a model of democratic maturity for the rest of the region. The Venezuela of today as Sartori, Linz and Diamond argue represents a presidentialist political system that risks becoming an authoritarian system. That is if Hugo Chavez's personalist, cult-like figure continues to extend its influence over all the facets of society. Meanwhile, Chavez continues to directly target his political adversaries, and has continuously threatened to close the only media network not fully aligned with his government, Globovision.

Finally, Hugo Chavez has proven once again that although he is willing to accept minor wins by the opposition, he continues to be fixated on retaining power indefinitely. Paradoxically Chavez's obsession with the media, his desire to continue accumulating power and his excessive spending might prove to be self-destructing, particularly if oil-revenues continue to decline.

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