

From Chavismo to a Democratic Left in Venezuela

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In April, Hugo Chávez's handpicked political heir, Nicolás Maduro, was elected president of Venezuela in an unexpectedly close race. Maduro will try to continue the Chavismo revolution, amid accusations of electoral fraud and the extreme polarization of the political landscape. But to be successful, he needs to speed the transformation of his party, the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) from an institution bound to the memory of its flawed yet charismatic founder into one that maintains a clear division of power and vigorous internal debate.

During the four decades before Chávez took power in 1998, two center-right parties—Democratic Action (AD) and the Social Christians (COPEI)—shared power under an arrangement known as *Puntofijismo* (after a pact signed in the Caracas home of former president Rafael Caldera). With strong backing from the United States, the coalition came close to privatizing the powerful oil industry and, by the time it fell from power, had presided over triple-digit inflation, high unemployment, and a profound division between the rich and the poor.

During Chávez's fifteen years in power, Venezuela's political institutions went through structural transformations of a revolutionary magnitude. The PSUV now controls—often by small electoral margins—97 out of 165 seats in the National Assembly, 20 out of 23 states, and all but one state council (or legislature).

To his admirers, Chávez represented an unprecedented hope for the desperately poor—and was the champion of a revived Latin American Left. But to his critics, he was a totalitarian Marxist with an iron grip over the oil-rich revenues of his nation. Chávez was variously called the new Bolívar, Castro's successor, an authoritarian dictator, a char-

ismatic leader, a crafty politician, a buffoon, and—most frequently—a ranting populist.

But Chavismo was no mere regression to an earlier era dominated by such charismatic populist figures as Argentina's Juan Perón and Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas. It is a new and genuinely radical mass movement, which captivated the poor and the excluded with a syncretic ideology inspired by three nineteenth-century icons: Simón Bolívar, the hero of independence; Ezequiel Zamora, the civil war leader; and Simón Rodríguez, Bolívar's tutor. Bolívar contributed to nationalism and to independence from imperial dominance, Zamora fought for social justice and the unity of peasants with the army, and Rodríguez led the drive for educating the masses and championed the search for a unique Venezuelan identity.

The Left in Latin America espouses, to different degrees, three ideologies: liberalism, grassroots democracy, and populism. Although Chavismo incorporates elements of all three, it gives priority to radical populism—a type of popular sovereignty that favors mechanisms for direct political participation, opposes negotiated pacts and coalitions, and favors the collective needs of “the people” over individual rights.

As a populist project, Chávez's government was a great success. Its leader rallied his supporters with frequent speeches, and a strong executive branch funneled benefits to the poor while setting up such new participatory institutions as *consejos comunales* (community councils) and *empresas mixtas* (mixed enterprises), which workers have a role in managing.

However, Chávez turned away decisively from the liberal tradition, which stresses the protection of citizens' rights and duties through law and seeks to limit the abuse of



Pictures of Chávez showed up often during the Meduro campaign. Photo by Joka Madruga/Flickr.

power. His government nationalized many strategic industries and services. And property rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law all eroded during his presidency.

What did Chávez's rule achieve, in simple numbers? On the positive side, the poverty rate decreased from 54 percent in 2003 to 24 percent in 2012, and the extreme poverty rate plunged to just 7 percent last year. Unemployment also declined from 17 percent in 1998 to 6 percent in 2012, although more than two-fifths of Venezuelans work in the "informal" or underground economy that is mostly unregulated and untaxed. And the greatest employment growth took place in the state-owned oil company, which is subject to the gyrations of the international energy market.

In addition to these new jobs, the reduction in poverty is mainly due to a huge increase in real social spending per person to about one-fourth of the federal budget. Education and

health care both improved markedly under Chávez. The illiteracy rate decreased from 10 percent in 1999 to 4.5 percent in 2009 (the date for which the most recent figures are available). A flagship social program, *Misión Barrio Adentro*, set up a network of health clinics in low-income neighborhoods where Cuban doctors treat the poor for free. Infant mortality declined from thirty-two per one thousand live births in 2000 to twenty-three in 2008. And life expectancy increased by more than two years.

There was also a major narrowing of the income gap. In Venezuela, the Gini coefficient, which measures economic inequality on a scale of zero to 100 (the higher the number, the more unequal the nation), improved from 51 in 2002 to 39 in 2011. In roughly the same period, the United States inched in the opposite direction, reaching a score of 47 by the end of George W. Bush's presidency.

The socioeconomic benefits of the Chávez administration stem not only from favorable oil prices in recent years but also from its decisions to charge higher royalties and to nationalize certain oil-related firms. Venezuela broadened the client base for its oil beyond the United States, establishing big joint exploration deals with countries like China, Brazil, and Russia. China alone now accounts for approximately 17 percent of Venezuela's total oil exports.

Unfortunately, the failures of Chavismo are as significant as its achievements. Crime increased substantially, impeding the government's ability to continue improving the lives of ordinary Venezuelans. The murder rate swelled from 19 per 100,000 people in 1997 to 73 per 100,000 in 2012. Judged by the homicide rate, Venezuela is currently the fifth most dangerous country in the world, just ahead of Colombia and behind such nations as Guatemala and Côte d'Ivoire. Guns are everywhere: on average, each household owns at least two. Worse, over 90 percent of homicides are never even prosecuted.

Moreover, inflation and corruption have eroded the performance of the economy. Consumer prices steadily increased from 14 percent in 2005 to 28 percent in 2011—and

this during a period of worldwide deflation. Furthermore, according to Transparency International, Venezuela is the tenth most corrupt nation in the world.

Can the new Maduro government overcome the polarization of politics and turn the PSUV into an instrument of democracy instead of a mere adjunct to a populist leader? The gubernatorial elections that were held last December—and received little attention in the United States—might have been a positive turning point. Henrique Capriles Radonski, the re-elected governor of the state of Miranda, emerged as the political leader of the opposition to Chavismo, a status he is likely to enjoy for some time to come.

As a former trade union leader and Chávez's longtime minister of foreign affairs, Maduro has some experience talking and negotiating with opponents to Chavismo, both at home and abroad. If he fails at mediating the extremely polarized tensions, the Chavismo movement will become more radical. His most likely successor would be Diosdado Cabello, a former member of the armed forces and current president of the National Assembly. Cabello represents the radical, pro-military wing of the PSUV and, according to the pro-government website, *aporrea.org*, is "the man most hated and vilified by the opposition and not much loved by Chavistas."

The consolidation of Chávez supporters into a single party dates from 2008. Before then, the Chavistas belonged to a variety of left-wing political parties led by *Movimiento Quinta República*. But, in 2008, the PSUV won control of seventeen of the twenty-two states and a clear majority of the popular

vote in the nation as a whole.

But the real test of whether the PSUV can nurture a healthy democracy will depend on the willingness of its leaders to enforce institutional checks on power that are already stipulated in Venezuelan law. It could start by separating key positions (for example, that of the attorney general and Venezuela's Electoral Council) from partisan loyalties. Under Chávez, the lack of separation between party and state (including governors, mayors, and ministers), betrayed a key principle of liberal democracy.

It would also help if PSUV's leaders ceased threatening reprisal and/or dismissal against members of Congress or the judiciary who raise objections to government policy. To become a universally respected institution, the PSUV will have to harness internal voices instead of repressing them and obey a set of rules it helps to formulate.

At least in the near future, the opponents to Chavismo will not be able to contribute much to the democratizing project. Although they united behind Henrique Capriles in the 2013 presidential election, and he lost to Maduro by just 1.5 percent, they presented no clearly defined ideology and did not consolidate into a single right-of-center political party. Instead, the opposition cobbled together a shaky alliance of some thirty parties, including, bizarrely, the Marxist-Leninist Red Flag. In the long run, a healthy Venezuelan Right would strengthen democracy in the nation by challenging the Left to contemplate the possibility of losing power.

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