
Why Chavez in Venezuela?

LEONARDO VIVAS

In late July 2000, Hugo Chavez Frias, former parachute commander, won the presidency of Venezuela for the second time in 18 months. Only eight years before, this same man had been the leader of an attempted coup d'etat that changed the trends and underlying rules of the country's democratic regime. After his first electoral victory in December 1998, Venezuela has experienced times of upheaval in its political foundations. First and foremost, the newly elected president pushed his main political proposal—the drafting and approval of a new constitution—through a series of elections in which he and his supporting parties gained a comfortable, and sometimes overwhelming majority. At the same time, he began a crude confrontation with the main pillars of political power outside his administration: Congress, the Supreme Court, the media, trade unions, the traditional political parties, and even at times with the Catholic Church.

Ever since Chavez started campaigning, after being freed from his imprisonment on coup d'etat charges, his language has been one of radical change and revolution in the face of what he regards as a corrupt political and economic elite. In that sense he has closely followed the old revolutionary rhetoric of the Latin American left, though he combines this with constant appeals to Bolívar, the founding father of independence, and with Christ's more rebellious remarks. To many observers, both internationally and at home, Venezuela under Chavez has not only thrown its legacy of political moderation overboard, but has entered a phase of the demolition of democratic rule and a deeper economic decline.

What has happened to Venezuela? Why have Venezuelans opted for this risky political project? Were there other viable alternatives? What does the emergence of Chavez mean in a region marked by social distress and political instability?

THE ORIGINS: FRUSTRATION AND MISTRUST

For many years, Venezuela was an exception in a subcontinent characterized by dramatic social problems, political unrest, and a tendency to re-establish relative order through military regimes. Between 1958 and 1998, Venezuela managed

LEONARDO VIVAS IS A FELLOW AT THE WEATHERHEAD CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF VENEZUELA COMPETITIVA.

to create and maintain a political system in which elections were held regularly, the opposition was granted access to power with no major disturbances, and the majority of people took it for granted that democracy was the best system in which to live. This uncommon situation was to a large degree made possible by the continuous flow of oil revenues, which provided a basis for creating other sources of wealth. In critical times, this peculiar economic condition also worked as a cushion, preventing matters from getting worse and offering even the poorest Venezuelans hope for a better life. Oil became such a fundamental feature of Venezuela's political environment that during the latest trend of military regimes that contaminated the region from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, only Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico continued to be ruled by democratic regimes. Furthermore, an important wave of political and economic immigrants entered the country in order to heal their wounds and find peaceful settlement for their families. Traditional political parties and most analysts, therefore, took for granted that a solid democratic tradition resistant to all potential challenges had been built in the country.

So far so good, until the economic situation became critical as a result of the sharp decline in oil revenues. An economy that was very stable in terms of prices, exchange rate, and interest rates for close to 60 years began to erode very quickly. Therefore, from the beginning of the 1980s Venezuela was welcomed as another member of the Latin American club of unstable economies. The degrading economy and declining expectations about the future also affected the perception of democracy and its short and midterm benefits. When the economic reforms of 1989 were launched by Carlos Andres Perez, an exceptionally popular politician, political instability rapidly occurred, despite the fact that the reforms were in keeping with regional initiatives for change. Venezuela suffered its worst eruption of riots in the last 60 to 70 years in February 1989, and later two military coups took place in February and November 1992.

But Venezuelans were not resenting their political leadership solely due to their shrinking wallets. A whole range of institutions that had been set up under 30 years of democratic rule had begun to crack, at times giving the impression that little remained to be expected from them. Although important political reforms took place, especially the decentralization of political and administrative power from the executive to provinces and local government, these changes did not seem enough nor were they advanced in a timely fashion. Compounding the problem, citizens held a low opinion of law enforcement, there were signs of rampant corruption in central government no matter which party ruled, and the main public services—health and education—began a rapid and sustained erosion in their capacity to deliver to an increasingly impoverished population. Last but not least, the sensitive question of personal security became a central worry for ordinary citizens in the wake of a growing crime rate.

Thus, when riots broke out in 1989 and three years later two coups were attempted against the most reformist government in decades, people began to withdraw support not only from central government but also from the main political parties, as well as from the political and institutional establishment as a whole. This was particularly true for the poorest sections in the big cities, which had become increasingly insulated from the ordinary circuits of consumption, banking networks, health services, and even public education. A social and political bomb had been activated and although some of its most common effect found a great echo in the media, overall capacity for reform on the part of public institutions seemed to go very slowly. The advent of the Caldera government in 1993 was the first advertisement that the predominance of the two traditional parties (Acción Democrática—Social Democrats, and Copei—Christian Democrats) was coming to an end. Caldera was elected in 1993—the same year Carlos Andres Perez was impeached—by a slight majority after an electoral run-off among four candidates of relatively equal popularity. Elected on a counter-economic reform ticket, Caldera's administration tried to follow heterodox economic policies more attuned to the popular sentiments of frustration. After two years of economic controls and a severe financial crisis, however, there was a major switch to mainstream economics, made possible by a renewal of investment in the oil industry. This change in tactic, however, was also unsuccessful, thus laying the groundwork for a regime collapse.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE POLITICAL REGIME

After a weak and ineffectual Caldera government failed to redress a situation that had been widely attributed to corrupt and neo-liberal domination, the margin for reformist regimes was reduced, as was the chance of a comeback of the traditional parties. In the general elections of 1998 discontent grew louder and louder. One important sign was that both traditional parties, which had controlled all the main preparations and outcomes of elections for 40 years, were unable to propose viable options, not only regarding political proposals but also in terms of leadership. After dramatic internal strains, the Demó-Christians opted to support Irene Saez, a widely popular mayor who had previously been Miss Universe. The dominant party, Acción Democrática (AD), after a long internecine struggle, allowed Claudio Fermin—their best candidate—to abandon the party and run as an independent. The party instead ended up choosing Luis Alfaro Ucero, an old guard leader, known for his tight control of the nomenklatura within the party but with no appeal to a public accustomed to popular figures with great capacity for managing their images through the media. There was a moment in those elections when the four candidates with the greatest popular support were all outsiders. It seemed that the bell was tolling for a political regime that had believed itself invincible.

So when Chavez arrived on the scene, the stage was already set for a major shakeup of the political scenery. After a campaign in which the lead changed every month, making it seem as if the entire country had become a dramatic play, Chavez won the election. He managed to beat his adversaries one by one. The last real challenger was Henrique Salas, a successful former governor who ran on an independent ticket. Salas masterfully managed to increase his popular support, slowly but steadily, over the course of the year, up to the point where he portrayed himself as the only democrat capable of beating Chavez. But, no matter what political maneuvering took place, including a crude campaign against him financed by the business community, Chavez had become a symbol of radical change. Using his charismatic character, Chavez was able to attract to his campaign most of the forces of discontent in Venezuela. Voters from the margins of society were drawn to Chavez by a sentiment that proved appealing to all social strata, from an important fraction of the remaining middle class and the working population, which had abandoned its previous AD alignment, to a portion of the elite class that was embittered with frustration. This coalition of supporters had shown its face in the electoral round of 1993, but that time had split its sympathies between Caldera and Andres Velasquez, a young trade union leader who resembled the charismatic Lula of the Partido Trabalhista in Brazil. By 1998, however, the time was ripe for a drastic change.

MORE THAN REVOLUTIONARY RHETORIC?

Beginning from the time he was granted amnesty from conspiracy charges by Caldera only three years after his attempted coups, Chavez had mounted an intense campaign built upon a very radical proposal: Let us have a new constitution. He argued that since the entire system was either inefficient or corrupt, it should be built again from scratch. Quite soon, his broad criticisms of the political establishment proved a catchy formula that drew immense support during the 1998 elections. No single reform would satisfy the high level of discontent; rather, an entire redesign of the institutional structure would have to take place through a new constitution. Curiously, constitutional reforms in Colombia and elsewhere had taken place under peaceful political discussions. Under Chavez they acquired revolutionary overtones. After the 1998 elections the country entered an apotheosis of political confrontation under which Chavez accused his main adversaries, both in politics and other institutional pillars of society, of opposing the reshaping of Venezuelan civil life or, at best, of being obstacles through their inertia.

Throughout the campaign and his first 20 months in office, Chavez and his supporters have tuned their political rhetoric to a traditional Latin American revolutionary stance colored with continuous allusions to Bolivar. The underlying suggestion is that the current circumstances are similar to the time of independence, if

not in terms of direct foreign domination, at least with respect to patriotic goals such as overcoming rampant poverty and regaining sovereignty in a global world. As in more classic revolutions, the crude nature of political confrontation not only derives from strategic considerations of wining out the enemy but from the conviction that all adversaries of the revolution deserve political death. Enemies of the 'process' should not only be confronted, they should be extricated altogether from their previous sources of influence and command.

To a certain extent political death has come to many formerly powerful leaders, not only in the traditional parties that lost under an unexpected scenario, but in the commanding circles of the judiciary, managers in the public sector, and elites in general. The extent to which the changes in the institutional framework allow emerging institutions to 'deliver the goods' that previous democratic regimes failed to provide will, of course, define the future of the new Chavian polity.

AN ANDEAN PATTERN

Prior to Chavez's inauguration, social and political conditions in the Andean region were growing more complicated, to say the least. But since his assumption of power, the situation has come into open disarray. Not only Colombia's all-out civil war, but also the overthrow of President Jamil Mahuad in Ecuador in early 2000 by an alliance of midlevel military officers and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities, have shown the extent to which democratic regimes can be overwhelmed by internal and external strains. At the same time, the political situation in Peru and Bolivia is showing the wear of time; in Peru the situation has matured into a typical regime crisis, whereas in Bolivia it has so far assumed the form of social unrest, which is not entirely inconsistent with its history.

There are some commonalities between Andean countries worth mentioning. One is of course political instability, which in some cases—like Ecuador and to a certain extent Bolivia—directly derives from economic distress; whereas in places like Colombia or Peru instability follows from more typical political causes. As explained above, instability in Venezuela seems to be a mixture of both causes. Strangely enough, a country like Colombia, which did not suffer the economic setbacks of the 1980s so typical of Latin America and managed to attain sustained growth for almost 30 years, seems to be suffering a second round of crisis within its peculiar breed of oligarchic democracy. And all available evidence indicates that Colombia's rural guerrillas are profiting heavily from the political distress. In Peru, the specific mixture of autocratic rule with open elections, which characterized the Fujimori era, worked nicely for a decade (or at least was accepted on its face in the international arena), but now faces contradictions that derive from a regime claiming democratic credentials but not up to the task of creating real and effective counterbalancing institutions.

Although not often mentioned, a second common feature of the Andean region, more relevant to the Chavez phenomenon, is the existence of movements whose rhetoric proclaims them the vanguards of change. In both Colombia and Ecuador, the actors pushing radical change call themselves Bolivarian followers, which means at least indirectly a claim to follow the route inaugurated by Chavez. This is true of both the political movement founded in 1999 by the FARC, the main guerrilla group in Colombia, and the rebels in the Ecuadorian army who conspired to oust a legally elected president. One recalls the scene last year when the FARC announced the creation of a new political group; a crowd of militiamen was shown wearing green and red berets and waving machine guns as they proclaimed themselves to be followers of Bolivar. No wonder a good number of political analysts have assumed that Venezuela's officially neutral stance on the Colombian conflict belies a 'positive chemistry' toward the guerillas.

Though not so explicit, the same political overtones and ideological roots found in the Chavist ideology are present in the insurgent movement in Ecuador, at least judging from the press releases from the military officers during their imprisonment and after they were let go. No matter what the differences in form or content may be, the similarities are striking, both in the rejection of mainstream economic policies, and in the rhetoric and repeated pledges to Bolivar's legacy. To what extent such similarities can point to a consolidated and homogeneous trend, and eventually a political tradition, is something difficult to predict. It is too early either to rule out that possibility or to postulate the emergence of a distinct reality signaling the political upheavals in the Andes. ■