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VENEZUELA: DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM IN THE XXI CENTURY

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Exercise Solo Flight

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VENEZUELA

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALISM IN THE XXI CENTURY

Introduction

Latin America has been the scenario for interesting political episodes. Different political projects have been exercised since Mexico to Argentina and why not to include Brazil, which its integration and cultural closeness make it part of the group. Each country in the south cone has experimented political instability, violent regimes, and ideological influences as a result of global events like the Cold War and globalization. The effects of the events as mentioned above have been exacerbated by some others such as rampant economic crisis, poor governance, high levels of corruption, criminality, and social exclusion. All of these negative aspects have affected the political environment of Venezuela among others in the region. Nevertheless, this country has been chosen as a referent for this work as it embraces the most dynamic and interesting political significance in Central and South America. Therefore, Venezuelan politics is not limited to a regionalism approach. It is and has been an important player in the global geopolitical structure. The political scenario and the economic preponderance have made Venezuela a global participant that counts in the global governance architecture. The Current Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, officially called since 1999, experimented a new political transition just in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias, ex-military and then leftist politician assumed the Venezuelan presidency backed by high levels of unpopularity and delegitimization of the dominant traditional political parties. Poor governance, mistrust, clientelism, corruption and economic turmoil finally paved the way for the introduction of attractive revolutionary proposals for a society seeking determinant changes in governance.

While Hugo Chavez professed an inclusive and participative democracy since his candidacy, today is difficult to consolidate a consented definition for the current political project of Venezuela. There is perhaps the most advanced and trusted electoral system in the region. The practice of democratic processes through elections and referendums is remarkable. Nevertheless, lack of constitutional rights for the citizens and social constraints put a nebulous framework for calling it a democracy. At the beginning of his first presidential term Hugo Chavez said to build a strong democracy. However, in January 2005 during the Fifth World Social Forum, he recalled his political project as the *Socialism of the Twenty-First Century* advocating the principles introduced by Heinz Dieterich. This work has the aim to explore since historical and contemporaneous perspectives the theoretical details by which tacitly define each political model and finally demonstrate that Venezuela exercises a repressive illiberal semi-democracy. In doing so, it will explore the conceptual aspects of democracy in Venezuela. Then it will explore socialist rhetoric in Venezuela's government to finally demonstrate the ambiguity and failure of such as hybrid political project.

Democracy in Venezuela

Before 1958, the country had been ruled by a complex mix of political-military experiments that easily can be divided into three different periods. Starting with a period of independence between 1810 and 1830 dominant elites led the country to a victorious stage dominating the Spaniard oppression. Between 1830 and 1935 there was born an age of *caudillismo*, which it was characterized by dictatorial oligarchies unable to find an effective state-building and nationhood strategies.¹ The last stage before democ-

¹ H. Michael Tarver and Julia C. Frederick, *The History of Venezuela* (New York: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2006), 79-80

racy officially was exercised in Venezuela is the period after World War I. By that then, with caudillos in power the country faced a petroleum boom without precedents in Latin-America. Nonetheless, an increasing social unrest due to inefficient economic policies triggered options for military juntas and classical bipartisan politics. The political cornerstone took place in 1958 with the overthrow of the last dictatorship in the country's history. Even though by military force, for the first time a democratically elected president succeed another elected by the people in Venezuela, and a new window of hope was opened. Tarver and Frederick asserted that "*The 1958 Junta Militar de Gobierno* delivered open elections within a year, which allowed the nation's political and social forces to create a new democratic and representative political system."² In order to enhance a more participative democracy, it was signed The *Punto Fijo Pact*. This accord would offer egalitarian measures for political parties in any electoral process. Hence, free and fair election started to be a dominant democratic value in Venezuelan society.

The Romulo Betancourt presidency can be seen as the first true democratic administration of that South-American country. Since this particular administration, Venezuela achieved a mature stabilization of democratic processes but in an environment of political polarization. First of all, electoral systems became to be efficient and highly recognized as incorruptible. Free and fair elections have been strictly exercised, and technological mechanism has been adopted in order to improve them.³ Moreover, the level of electoral participation is vastly recognizable around the country, and military

² *Ibid.*, 100

³ Edward Robertson, "Former US President Carter: Venezuelan Electoral System "Best in the World" in *Global Research News*. Accessed 25 April 2015 at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/former-us-president-carter-venezuelan-electoral-system-best-in-the-world/5305779>

coups intents have been unsuccessful. Hence, Venezuela has perhaps the primary requisite to be a democracy. Nevertheless, a democracy is not uniquely dependent on an effective electoral system and popular participation of voters. In terms of political polarization, Venezuelan governments have done enough to divide the society. Poor governance, political mistrust, rampant corruption, and a clear disinterest to comply the Punto Fijo Pact, systematically make diminished the popular support for dominant political parties. As social unrest normally confuses the interests of voters, new political proposals can be easily developed promising interesting initiatives of imperative changes. Therefore, political polarization fertilized the proliferation of new ideological waves and new democratic practices that corrupted the essence of true democracy.

True democracy is better exercised by liberal democratic systems. A liberal democracy, as Zakaria defines it, is “a political system amends not only by free and fair elections, but also the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.”⁴ Taking into account those conditions, the case of Venezuela clearly exemplify what a liberal democracy is not. For instance, in Venezuela the rule of law is vastly recognized as inefficient, corrupt, and politically influenced. The rule of law index 2014 from World Justice Project shows that the criminal and civil justices are areas where not only corruption of judges and judicial officers is rampant but also and more pervasive is the lack of independence of the judicial apparatus from the central power of the government.⁵ The same research asserts

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” in *Globalization And The Challenges Of a New Century* Patrick O Meara, Howard D. Mehlinger, and Mathew Krain, Eds. 181 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2000)

⁵ World Justice Project. “Rule of Law Index 2014” Accessed 25 April 2015 at <http://data.worldjusticeproject.org/#/index/VEN>

that “in Venezuela, the media (TV, radio, newspapers) cannot freely express opinions against government policies and actions without fear of retaliation.”⁶ Therefore, the Venezuelan political system has significant characteristics of an illiberal democracy. Zakaria identifies a democracy as illiberal when “democratically elected governments ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedom.”⁷ Venezuela has been monitored in terms of human rights violations and the level of freedom of the population where it has been not very well ranked. It is recognizable the scope of social projects seeking to improve the dignity of life among Venezuelan society as a final goal. Nonetheless, economic, social and cultural rights have been put in danger as a result of hard line governmental measures. Civil and political rights have been also put in danger due to high levels of official corruption, impunity, lack of law enforcement and poor governability.⁸

Some scholars like Samuel P. Huntington agree that governments can be undesirable and still being democratic as the result of open, free and fair elections.⁹ However, some other arguments conspicuously assert that not only those aspects can be used to certify a democratic system of government. According to Smith and Ziegler, a democratic system can become semi-democratic if it has some characteristic such as “free elections but only one candidate had a realistic prospect of winning, or any major can-

⁶ World Justice Project. “*Rule of Law Index 2014*.” Accessed 25 April 2015 at <http://data.worldjusticeproject.org/#/index/VEN>.

⁷ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” in *Globalization And The Challenges Of a New Century*. Patrick O’Meara, Howard D. Mehlinger, and Mathew Krain, Eds. 181 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2000)

⁸ Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. “*Annual Report 2014*.” Accessed 28 April 2015 <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/docs/annual/2014/docs-en/Annual2014-chap4Venezuela.pdf>

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington. *The Third Wave*. quoted in Fareed Zakaria. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company.. 2003) 18.

didate or political party was effectively prevented from winning and elected leaders obligated to share power with or cede it to non-elected groups.”¹⁰ A semi-democracy allows the participation of opposition parties giving in some extends a blanket of plurality but governments in power or politicians close to the rulers dominate the political competition. Particularly, since the Hugo Chavez first presidency the political parties’ participation has been dramatically unbalanced and restrictive indeed. The centralization of power and the lack of participations is another element that makes Venezuela a semi-democracy. This condition is significant as it gives transparency and support for fair dialogue and decisional debates. Pickles asserts that “genuine democratic government must involve a genuine dialogue between different strands of opinion, and particularly between supporters and opponents or potential opponents of the system.”¹¹ In Venezuela, the political power is overwhelmingly exercised by the executive, and the so-called participation is no more than the use of simplistic mechanism exalting the right of vote. True democracy must be the voice of the people throughout their elected governments. However, this principle has been making it up under a populist belief of participation. Brewer makes it visible affirming that “there are institutional entities disposed to make the people believe that they are participating when in fact they are only being mobilized and submitted to control by centralized power.”¹² Interestingly, Venezuela has experimented stages of competitive authoritarianism that has made it an illiberal semi-democracy with strong policies that make it also repressive.

¹⁰ Peter H. Smith and Melissa R. Ziegler. “Liberal and Illiberal Democracy in Latin America.” *Latin American Politics and Society*. (Spring 2008) 50, 1. 33

¹¹ Dorothy, Pickles. *Democracy*. (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd 1970) 22

¹² Allan R. Brewer-Carias. *Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela: The Chavez Authoritarian Experiment*. (New York: Cambridge University Press. 2010) 185

The Socialist rhetoric

The Cold War effects with its communist influences in Latin-America impacted democratic political projects. The degree of social and economic unrest in the country as a result of poor governance and corruption until the near end of the twentieth century fertilize the political ground for new and revolutionary proposals. In fact, with a not decorous military and political career, Hugo Chavez Frias had the ability to introduce effective populist discourses as the better solution for the Venezuelan turmoil. Nevertheless, he never used neither a socialist nor a communist rhetoric to achieve his political goals. Among the population, Hugo Chavez was seen more as a reformist instead of a revolutionary. His political propaganda was consistent with a discourse of valuable changes but fortifying the democratic values such popular participation and the real power of the people represented by his elected movement.

Since taking power Chavez started to comply his political reforms. He changed the constitution, and several important social achievements took place with it. The new political project with governmental reforms and new national constitution Chávez started with his social commitments for fighting for the poor and oppressed. In his first term, literally millions have been lifted out of poverty and given new opportunities to improve their lives defending the theory of equality, liberty and fraternity. The implementation of *missions*, as the Chavez government called the initiatives to fight in pro the poor and better social conditions, was recognizably positive for working and poor classes. Areas such as education, health, home and cost of living were the referent for asserting how successful and convenient seemed to be that political project. Therefore, this populist project achieved enough public support due to the effective management of the results. Weeks clearly exemplify the outcome

of populism within the Venezuelan population which feel that “for the first time, a president is really paying attention to them and even promising to solve problems that have been totally ignored in the past.”¹³ The first presidential term of Hugo Chavez finished with appropriate local and regional environments to fortify his long term ambitions. Moreover, the mix of communist ideals reinforced by such as effective populism was the basic construction for a further socialist rhetoric.

Advocating the principles introduced by Heinz Dieterichin, Hugo Chavez recalled his political project as the *Socialism of the Twenty-First Century* during the Fifth World Social Forum in January 2005. “The Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez referred to socialism as the only alternative to bringing about the necessary transcendence of capitalism.”¹⁴ This Azellini’s statement refers to the used rhetoric in Venezuelan politics in the last twenty years which gained significant support not only internally but also in the Latin American region and broader in other regions and states which attack capitalism. Furthermore, constitutional and political reforms provide enough benefits for implementing radicalization in terms of national economy, strengthening the executive power, maximizing the oil power, consolidating the control of the armed forces and developing strategic foreign relations to spread the socialism in Latin America as the final goal. As an example, Hugo Chavez politicized the armed forces and rich a powerful control over that repressive instrument that helped him in a significant manner to achieve his socialist objectives. A very paralleled reality with the Zakaria’s arguments about illiberal democracies, “States with vast security apparatuses that suspend constitutional rights become predatory, maintaining some order but also arresting oppo-

¹³ Gregory, Weeks. *Understanding Latin American Politics*. (Boston: Pearson. 2015) 50

¹⁴ Dario, Azzellini. “The Communal System as Venezuela’s Transition to Socialism.” in *Communism in the 21st Century*. Shannon, Brincat. Ed. (Santa Barbara: Praeger. 2014) 218

nents, muzzling dissent, nationalization industry, and confiscating property.”¹⁵ Hence, the so-called Socialism of Twenty-first Century in Venezuela was finally the driver for a concentration of power in the presidential figure that in the end demonstrated high levels of authoritarianism and thus social and political repression. Transparency International ranked Venezuela as the worst country in terms of judicial independence in the 2011-2012 index.¹⁶ The Venezuelan government is nowadays a good example of what Madison arguments about the accumulation of power. “The accumulation of all power, legislative, executive, and judiciary in the same hands, may justly be pronounced the very definition of Tyranny.”¹⁷ That is Venezuela today.

The Current Trends

The death of Hugo Chavez in 2013 was not the end of the socialist rhetoric and the repressive illiberal semi-democracy in Venezuela. In fact, as a vast pro-Chavez population believed, Nicolas Maduro was the divine elected by the reincarnation of Chavez’ ideals and the continuation of “*Chavism*” as a renewed political system. Nicolas Maduro effectively represents not only the continuation of the power’s monopoly, but also the radicalization of Chavist ideologies backed by populism. However, Maduro’s administration has generated not the expected outcomes of Chavism. Indeed, the current Venezuela is perhaps the antithesis of

¹⁵ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” in *Globalization And The Challenges Of a New Century*. Patrick O’Meara, Howard D. Mehlinger, and Mathew Krain, Eds. 181 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2000) 187

¹⁶ Transparency International. “*Country Report*.” Accessed 01 May 2015 at <https://www.transparency.org/country#VEN>

¹⁷ J. Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. B. F. Wright, (Cambridge, MA, 1961) 336, quoted in Allan R. Brewer-Carias. *Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela: The Chavez Authoritarian Experiment*. (New York: Cambridge University Press. 2010) 212

the earlier ideals of Hugo Chavez and his hybrid regime. It is clear that the current administration has exacerbated the economic unrest and the social instability in Venezuela, but it is also clear that Maduro inherited the preconditions for such failure. The socialist rhetoric and the practice of it in Venezuela are reinforcing the very well-known thesis of Winston Churchill pointing out that “Socialism is a philosophy of failure and its inherent virtue of equally sharing misery.”

Poor governance, poor economic administration and uncontrolled corruption are the bases for Venezuela's failure. The Venezuelan economy is highly dependent on oil revenues. Since the oil exports became the primary source of income the country was progressively abandoning the production capacity converting itself in an import consumerist. Initiatives such as the exchange rate reforms and the public subsidiary system have been poorly administered, and they have been instruments to promote black markets and high levels of corruption. The second presidential term of Hugo Chavez and the shift to socialism damaged the good starting of his populist politics. For instance in 2004 the Chavez administration was ranked by a 120 place among 175 countries in terms of corruption perception. However, since 2005 the ranking for Venezuela has been gradually worst. In 2104, the corruption perception index placed Venezuela in the 165 of 175 countries.¹⁸ Those levels of corruption in an administration represent the causes why in a country with the second largest oil reserves in the world have a population with economic unrest, with an unacceptable infrastructure, with a

¹⁸ Transparency International. “*Country Report*.” Accessed 01 May 2015 at <https://www.transparency.org/country#VEN>

rampant criminality, with shortage of basic supplies, and an inflation of near 70 per cent in December 2014¹⁹ that easily will continue getting worse.

There are some current challenges that the current administration in Venezuela has to deal with. The current external debt is perhaps the most important to take in mind. Nicolas Maduro has made desperate movements in order to deal with the current shortage of oil revenues. China, Iran, and Russia has provided enormous economic loans in the past in exchange for oil exports. However, it is unlikely that those countries continue doing so as a result of the interest rate that Venezuela has so far. The fall of oil prices during the current administration has put in danger the Venezuelan economy. Printing bolivars as a measure to equilibrate the exchange rate and its consequences in the economy has become a bigger problem that helps inflation to go higher. Latin American countries have gradually separated from the radicalize ideology of Chavism. Ecuador, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua as the most supportive regimes for Chavism, nowadays have contemplated different approaches in the economic realm. Although pro-Chavez, those countries understood the danger of economic radicalization and accommodated their economies to more flexible initiatives keeping certain levels of capitalism. Cuba as the most fundamentalist Latin American country for social-communist ideologies twisted to the United States as the major icon of capitalism in a very friendly and peacefully dialogue. Consequently, one can argue that Venezuela is going to have another episode of political transition in a near future. Unless the current regime resorts to keep the suffering status-quo to maintain the populist discourse and thus retain power.

¹⁹ Trading Economics. *Venezuela Inflation Rate 1973-2015*. Accessed 04 May 2015 at <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/venezuela/inflation-cpi>

Conclusion

Venezuela is a very good case study to expand the knowledge about political ideologies and more important Democracy. It has experimented different types of democratic and nondemocratic regimes. Liberators, Military coups, Caudillismo, communism, socialism, liberal, and illiberal democracies are in the large list of political experiments in that country's history. In 1958, democracy was determinately established as the only political system. Regardless the democratic processes in Venezuela that has openly shown to be participative and inclusive with the people, there is also a socialist project defended by the government. As demonstrated by this paper, the real politics in Venezuela is a complex mix of governmental policies that in the end clarify the vision of an illiberal democracy. Nevertheless, there are blurred aspects that make it not a simple illiberal democracy.

Free but not so fair elections and authoritarianism are enough to identify a political system as a semi-democracy. Reformist in the beginning but authoritarian and radicalized in the end, Hugo Chavez converted a referent democracy in Latin America to a repressive and illiberal semi-democracy. The concentration of power, the consolidation of the armed forces as the instrument of repression, and the total dominance of the rule of law in the country are the determinant causes to shift the governmental system in an authoritarian regime. Poor economic administration and corruption are also part of the disease Venezuela is suffering as a result of those political and economic ideologies under the label of the Socialism of the Twenty-first Century. The current administration is dealing with demanding challenges, and the near future is also requiring structural transitions among the different aspects of the country. Venezuela has the resources and the potential to do significant and beneficial changes. Nevertheless, the political class in Venezuela has to be realistic and much more open minded

to lead political, economic, military, social, and diplomatic changes according to the lessons learned from the so-called Socialism of the Twenty- first century or even more contemporary Chavism.

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