

Abstract

This paper seeks to give a brief description of Venezuelan political situation, in the most accurate and impartial way possible. The first two chapters, focus on the social, economic, and institutional aspects of the years in which Chavez remained in power, i.e. from 1999 to 2013. The main policies, reforms and innovations he introduced were examined, in order to provide the basic tools necessary to undertake a more in depth study of the future prospects for Venezuela.

The first chapter begins with a short biographical sketch of the life of Hugo Chavez. The aim of this sketch was to provide an in-depth contextual analysis of the *Movimiento V Republica*, the political party founded by Chavez. To create this contextual picture, the history and, cultural setting of the party were examined, alongside, the myths of Chavez's youth – a continuous source of inspiration for him – and his first forays into the social and political arena, which were closely linked to his military career.

From the second paragraph onward, this paper delves into the hearth of the matter, by analyzing the institutional framework radically revised by Chavez by means of the new Constitution . In essence, this document introduces seven important changes. The first and most evident, is an official state name change to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, a shift that seeks to emphasize the importance of the figure of Simon Bolivar in the imagination of Chavez and his political projects .

The second dimension of the new constitution discussed is the creation of a new political mechanism: the recall referendum. By this procedure, if a pre-established number of citizens demand it, the termination of the mandate of any publicly-elected official, even the President of the Republic, can be effected.

The next four elements profoundly changed the major organs of the State. With the

new Constitution, the National Assembly, the legislature of Venezuela, became unicameral in order to make it more efficient. Next, the National Electoral Council (CNE), an extant component of the government, was subordinated to the National Assembly as part of, the reform of the '99. The new Constitution established that its members must be elected by the legislature, notoriously prerogative of the PSUV, the new Chavez's party created in 2008 to unify all the left wing parties. This maneuver is emblematic of Chavez's desire for totalitarian-level control, as it invests in the CNE the power to confer legitimacy and legality on all electoral proceedings, whether at the national, local, or trade union level. Further evidence of Chavez's desire to centralize power comes in the form of changes introduced to the composition of the Supreme Court and the establishment of the Supreme Court of Justice, whose judges, once again, must be approved by the National Assembly and who may still be dismissed in the course of their term by the same legislative body.

The next component is a completely new entity, inserted in Bolivarian Constitution, the *Poder Ciudadano* or Ombudsman. This institution shows the praiseworthy face of chavism, as it puts in place a strong bulwark to defend the rights of citizens, who can, as a last resort, contact the Ombudsman.

The seventh and final aspect of the chavist regime is more recent, not dating back to the Constitution of '99, but to the constitutional referendum of 2009, through which the former president, with a sensational afterthought, sought and obtained the elimination of the term limits for the state charges, just introduced with the new Constitution.

The third paragraph, on the other hand, is reserved for the economic and social policies launched by Chavez. His coming to power was greeted, from the outset, with enthusiasm from a good part of the population, because it replaced a government that by then lost the confidence of the people. During all the years of his regime, the Bolivarian *líder* had always striven to keep alive the favour of the masses by augmenting contact with the populace, especially with the poorest segments of it. All of his political activities were

designed to satisfy the expectations of the people who supported him, again the poorest in the nation. During his fourteen years presidency, Chavez designed dozens of programs – the so-called *misiones Bolivarianas* – to introduce economic, alimentary, and sanitary aid to the most outlying and degraded areas of the country. From 2000, the year of the UN summit that fixed the Millennium Development Goals, until this year, Chavez's social policies have ended hunger and lowered both the index of poverty and rate of illiteracy in Venezuela. These successes have had a high cost: they placed the bulk of their burden on the industrial and entrepreneurial classes, in terms of free private-sector economic initiative.

The price in terms of freedom of thought and expression, on the other hand, has been paid by the entire population, and to a greater extent, by Chavez's opposition. Chavez's administration has, in effect, subjected all to tight control through the media, trade unions, and even through elections (see the "Tascon's list" and the "Maisanta program" episodes discussed below).

On the international level, the role of Venezuela has always been inextricably linked to the extraction and sale of its oil. Chavez has always engaged foreign powers through so-called "petro-diplomacy", in an attempt to impose his hegemonic control all over Latin America – mainly through ALBA and MERCOSUR – by means of a heavily anti-American and anti-imperialist perspective.

The second chapter deals with the definition of chavism as hybrid regime, confirmed by the following analysis. This argument is supported by the method applied here, namely the comparison of the Venezuelan situation with the guarantees to human, civil, political, and economic rights established in the Constitution. The first paragraph, concerning human rights, highlights, in particular, the condition of Venezuelan prisons, among the most violent of the world. The treatment of prisoners, as denounced by many different organizations – NGO and IGO – violates the most basic human rights. This

portion also mentions the behavior of the government with regard to the major international organizations for the protection of human rights and to policies designed to impede the work of those organizations.

The discussion of civil rights is examined in depth in the second paragraph. The first part focuses on the right to life, the right to the inviolability of the person, and to personal freedom, including the rights to a fair trial and of the independence of the judiciary. The second part, however, analyzes in more detail the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, thought, and expression. The greater focus on this theme in this portion of the paper is justified by the fact that the Chavez's regime considered the control of the media a focal point of its governance. Having understood the importance of the media in influencing the people and in keeping the opposition at bay, Chavez tried in every way, to monopolize the distribution of this service. In addition, thanks to his surprising charisma and his communications skills, he was able to keep alive the affection, won thanks to his redistributive social policies, of thousands of Venezuelans.

The third paragraph contains, in substance, the impact of the Chavez's regime, on political rights. They were not sufficiently guaranteed even before Chavez, his accession to power helped to systematize and improve the control on voting. Chief among examples of this phenomenon are the episodes of "Tascon's list" and the "Maisanta program", through which the government has pursued systematic discrimination to the detriment of large sections of the population that did not support the chavist regime.

Finally, the last paragraph deals with the consequences that the impressive social programs of Chavez had, not only on the real economy of the country – issue also engaged in paragraph 3.1 – but also, and above all, with respect to the economic rights of citizens. The Venezuelan economy had always been founded on the oil sector, and, in the years of Chavez, it saw its dependence on the precious black gold, and obviously on the oscillations of its price, increase. This reality is explained by reference to outrageous

public expenditure, resulting from the *misiones* and from economically burdensome international trade agreements with nations in the Caribbean. In order to get the financial means for a similar policy, it was necessary to convey all their energies in the leading sector of the Venezuelan economy, the oil industry.

This initiative has led to the nationalization of a huge number of private companies. In this way, the State has been able to regulate the trends in pricing for both the domestic and export markets. However, discouraging free private initiative led to the loss of competitiveness and productivity of the industrial apparatus.

The third chapter examines the period after the death of Hugo Chavez, on 5 March 2013. The chapter is divided into two paragraphs, in order to investigate the political and economic developments of the situation in Venezuela subsequent to that date.

The first paragraph concerns the internal affairs of the country, starting after the death of Chavez with the elections that brought Nicolas Maduro to power. The period was characterized by the episodes of violence, including clashes in the streets to those in the National Assembly. Unlike Chavez, president-elect Maduro dealt with a strong and compact opposition from the outset. This united front foregrounds the most pressing economic issues with which Maduro must engage, if he intends to revive the economy of his country, the topic of the next portion of the text. Indeed, he has inherited a country with an economic system and an industrial apparatus drift: the excessive dependence of Venezuela on oil, makes it too vulnerable to the unpredictable fluctuations in the price of crude.

Precisely because of the exaggerated concentration of its productive energies in the oil sector, Venezuela often encounters periods during which basic necessities, such as oil, flour, rice, toilet paper, and soap, are in short supply. Discussion then proceeds to identify those measures that the new government has adopted, to deal with these shortages, in the immediate future.

This chapter, also considers two other hot topics in Venezuelan reality: crime and corruption. Venezuela ranks high among world nations in both of these crucial areas. Inevitably connected to these issues, are the slowness and the inefficiency of the judicial system. Without doubt, when confronted with issues as difficult to resolve as these, the government should seek to institute serious, rather than provisional, measures, in order to eradicate definitively these two wounds from Venezuelan society.

Finally, the concluding paragraph of this thesis is dedicated to the foreign policy of Maduro or, rather, given the brevity of his presidency thus far, to the guidelines that Maduro has decided to establish for the diplomatic relations with other countries.

By way of structure, this paragraph is divided into three parts, providing an overview of Venezuelan foreign relations that opens and closes on the American continent. It begins with a discussion of Venezuela's relations with the countries of Latin America, and in particular, its relations with the two large regional organizations in the area, ALBA and MERCOSUR. This is followed by consideration of the agreements that Maduro is planning with the overseas countries, i.e. China, and Russia, since these first months of government. Finally, the section concludes by returning to the American continent, analyzing Venezuela's diplomatic relations with the United States of America, its long enemy.

Contrary to the hopes and expectations of many international observers, the new elections, which culminated in Maduro's victory, did not bring about the substantial changes believed necessary in post-Chavez Venezuelan politics. Both in the administration of internal affairs, and, perhaps more keenly, in foreign policy, the new president is sticking, almost meticulously, the script of his predecessor. Relations with the other countries of Latin America remain close, under the always heralded banner of a Bolivarian pan-American ideal, which aims, to cover the goals of Venezuelan hegemony in the region.

Diplomatic relations with China and Russia, already woven together by Chavez through a series of trade, energy and financial agreements, seem similarly favorable. These signs are further strengthened by Maduro's visits to both countries, during which he proposed further agreements along the lines of the extant ones.

With regard to the US, Maduro initially broke with the previous regime's policies. In fact, in the days just after the elections, the meeting between Jaua, the Venezuelan foreign minister, and Kerry, US Secretary of State, boded well for the future. However, more recently, Maduro's government has conformed his choices to the chavist practice. The tones of the Venezuelan rhetoric returned to those of the roused anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism chavist, casting the United States once again as interlopers who see themselves as guarantors of order and democracy in the world, and in particular, in their own "backyard".