

Democracy, populism and poverty
Venezuelans and their democracy
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The term "populism" defines almost the entire spectrum of traditional politics in Latin American contemporary society. In the beginning, it was characterized by conservative movements opposed to the liberal changes represented by the capitalist development at the end of the 19th century.

Later, the term and its ideology, associated with the socialist left, were used by the radical anarchistic and fascist movements at the first half of the 20th century.

Nowadays, the neoliberal capitalist project, natural enemy of any populist expressions, pretends to make it synonymous of demagoguery. Perhaps this is the concept best assigned to this social and political movement, especially in Latin America, where the governments that don't accept imposed foreign politics in the name of national independence and sovereignty, are referred to as populist. When these same governments apply liberal policies and fail, they are accused of wrongly applying the reforms deemed "necessary" by foreign powers.

In any case, for the regular man and woman, the term "populism" represents the disdain of the elites and the manipulations and deceits used by its governments to rule over the disadvantaged and disillusioned majorities.

The goal of these elites is to protect their privileges that come with the control of political and economic power.

Among the most common populist promises are the agrarian reforms of the 60s, promised to the Latin American farmer. Based on that somewhat vague but very common idea in Latin America, the Representative Democracies of the 80s and 90s were purely "populist." Their failure shows that they were not the answer to the needs and demands of the electorate. The people were deceived by their leaders, several times.

Venezuela is a good example of a country whose recent history was shaped by the populist governments of the 1980s. Indeed, in 1989, President Carlos Andrés Pérez, was elected president for a second time, after running a political campaign full of populist promises such as ending poverty.

Instead, he decided to apply the economic measures of "structural readjustment", praised by the International Monetary Fund. The application of these economic policies provoked massive inflation, which in turn, caused a rebellion due to hunger, called the "Caracazo" which took place mainly in the Venezuelan capital. The government's reaction was to make the Armed Forces intervene, causing hundreds of deaths among the thousands of demonstrators on the streets and in the less privileged areas of Caracas.

To respond to the continuous failure of the populist parties and to the abuses during the "Caracazo", a popular political and social movement emerged, lead by the current President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez.

Seven years ago, our country entered a period of deep transformations, not only at the political level but also at the legislative, economic and social levels. Let's not be naïve. Every intense process of social transformation is difficult. It is shaped by hopes of social progress, some successes and real accomplishments, but also by troubles, resistance,

and sometimes, crisis. We have heard of the term "crisis" for the past thirty-five years. I remember that this word, now of current use, was the object of analysis by University experts in the 1980s. In the industrialized countries, they use to say that unemployment and inflation were the main characteristics of a crisis and that governments applied policies to "get out the tunnel." In Latin America, especially in southern countries, it was the time of the ovens, the gorillas, the dictatorships, the violations of human rights and the total absence of democracy. In brief, the 1980s were also times of "crisis."

The political situation in Venezuela was little known at that time. Human rights were violated and basic freedoms were denied to the people, that was the "Venezuela effect", a country that was at the same time rich and poor.

These practices were common for the democratically elected Social-Democratic and Christian-Democratic governments, which had been in power since the 1960s. Our "crisis", developed for decades, and exploded at the end of the 1980s, when the populist government of Carlos Andrés Pérez applied structural readjustment policies praised by the International Monetary Fund.

Those measures provoked a generalized increase in the price of gasoline, basic foods and services, and lead to the popular rebellion known as the "Caracazo". The government of Carlos Andrés Pérez used the Police and Armed Forces to control the situation, provoking the murder of hundreds of people.

This black page in our recent history left deep and permanent marks in generations of Venezuelans.

Let us be honest. It is only under dictatorships and authoritarian regimes that conflicts don't reach public light and are hidden from the media and the political scene. The Nobel Prize of Economics Amartya Sen analyzed this phenomenon in the cases of hunger. In Venezuela, the Bolivarian Government has undertaken substantial reforms. One after another, all the political tendencies in Venezuela express themselves freely on their support or disapproval of government reforms. This is what should happen in all democracies and in all open societies, as you well know.

I would say that the vast majority of Venezuelans are building an exemplary democracy, a democracy that is strengthening its legitimacy, day after day, by making an effort to defend itself with the weapons of human rights, the legitimacy ascribed by the free and universal right to vote, and the will of the people inscribed in the Bolivarian Constitution, approved by popular referendum for the first time in Venezuelan history.

And the enemies of the democracy? They exist in Venezuela like they exist everywhere else. Their existence characterizes all young democracies, like ours, which go through a sort of "teenage crisis". The past so-called "democratic" period between 1958 and 1998 were just forty years of political agreement between the populist Social-Democratic Party (Democratic Action) and the Christian- Democratic Party (Copei) and this period was only democratic in appearance. As proof of that fact, we have that these political parties did not respond to the people's legitimate aspirations nor did they train truly democratic leaders among their ranks. Indeed, several politicians and deputies of the Parliament, members of the Democratic Action, Copei and First Justice parties and also some intellectuals self-nominated leftists, did not condemn the coup d'etat of April 11, 2002 and, directly or indirectly, supported the small group of dissident military men demonstrating at Plaza Altamira. In this way, they showed their deep disdain for democracy and for the Venezuelan people. On April 12 and April 13, 2002 some deputies of the current opposition even supported the appropriator Carmona when he pronounced that the parliament would be dissolved by decree.

Only four years ago, the Venezuelan people and the institutions elected in the most democratically way possible, were victims of an aggression that pretended to wipe out the rights and democratic freedoms so courageously conquered. We all know what happened later, that magnificent demonstration of a people supporting the legitimate government, the result of a common project and the free will of the population. The Venezuelan people stated clearly that there was no way back. The anti-democratic process, with its fascist, racist and reactionary tendency, ended that dark April day in 2002.

But it ended. Of that, I am sure. In today's Venezuela there is no place for military coups. And I should say that there is not place for military dictatorships or for the violation of human rights in Latin America. That is only part of the past of the dramatic history of Latin America. The Latin American peoples, started to walk under democracy, and full of hope, on different paths.

That is the truth. No one can deny it. We face the tremendous challenge of national reconciliation. It is a task that we undertook since the election of President Hugo Chávez Frías, in 1998, working to obtain more social justice. Because we found a profoundly divided and angry country, with a very small minority of Venezuelans living in privilege and a huge majority of Venezuelans deprived of basic rights such as access to health, food, housing, education, energy, and recreation. Venezuela was a small paradise surrounded by a big hell, a country at the edge of social explosion and bankruptcy.

Recently, after the occurrences of April 2002, we undertook that same task, in the voice of President Chávez. He established a national dialogue, without any kind of discrimination, aware that a society cannot live long in a climate of confrontation. This call to dialogue was directed to those who did not share the ideas of the popular majority, so that they can express their opposition through the various democratic ways offered by the Constitution. This is the same Constitution that the military coup rushed to abolish as soon as they misappropriated the highest functions of the state.

The Organization of American States, the United Nations and the Carter Centre participated actively in that national dialogue. The OAS General Secretary traveled several times to Venezuela in order to take part in this mission. Finally, on August 15, 2004, a large majority of Venezuelans endorsed President Chávez, ratifying him as President of the country and exercising their right to vote for the eighth time in six years. More recently, at the end of 2005, Venezuelans elected a new General Assembly and are preparing for new presidential elections on December 2006.

In the last few months, a desperate opposition, radicalized and amplified by the power of part of the media, which without ethics or scruples, has retaken the offensive to impose its point of view on the rest of the country. The government and the popular majority fight these initiatives with the tools of political discourse. That is Democracy! But let us not forget that all democracies are based on the right of the opposition to exist and the implied agreement that all will submit to the results of elections. Each time these initiatives have taken place there have been people tempted to replay the adventure of April 11, 2002. But each time they've had to step back, prisoners of their own contradictions and because there is little receptivity for their positions among Venezuelans. Not every Venezuelan supports the Government unconditionally and there is nothing wrong with that. That is an impossible achievement. But the vast majority of Venezuelans support democracy. It is in the framework of democracy that Venezuelans want to build "good governance". It cannot be decreed, it has to be built step by step, progressively, without rush. How long did the so-called developed countries need to build their "good governance"?

Our "good governance" means essentially to give new content to democracy because for us it has to be "participative and protagonist". In 2004, the UNDP published a report on the democracies of Latin America that states that more than half of Latin-Americans would prefer a dictatorship than a democracy if an authoritarian regime could solve their economic problems.

Another report on the same year, done by the private company Latin-barómetro, arrived at the same conclusion, noting that between 1996 and 2004, support for democracy rose in Venezuela. Does a direct correlation exist between these poll results and the fact that in Venezuela we are looking for a viable democratic alternative to representative democracy? The economist Amartya Sen states that the best solution against hunger is democracy. Indeed, in Venezuela, under President Chávez's government this principle is becoming a reality. We intend to give power to the poor. To diminish poverty we have to increase democracy. Our Bolivarian Constitution facilitates the participation of organized communities based on the principles of solidarity and co-responsibility. The poor have taken the lead and the Bolivarian Government endorses and supports their initiatives. There is no other way. Democracy is also the only way to fight terrorism. Even though misery and hunger make possible the existence of terrorism, there is no good terrorism or bad terrorism. There is only one terrorism: punishable, detestable and cowardly. But, I insist, we can only beat terrorism with more democracy. We proved it in 2002, when Venezuelans and their democracy forced the defeat of a coup d'etat and of an oil sabotage which had the support of foreign economic powers.

The UNDP disclosures show that Latin-Americans do not trust a democratic pattern limited to a political representation that ignores the economic, cultural, social and environmental aspects of participatory democracy and that does not reflect the popular will. Two centuries ago, Simón Bolívar, the Liberator, said that the best government system is one which gives its people the highest amount of well-being, stability and social security. Based on this common sense principle, our democracy is inspired in our Latin-American and Caribbean historical roots, founded on the principles of cooperative solidarity, complementing and respecting sovereignty.

The Millennium Goals are challenges to our democracies in Latin America, the Caribbean and the world. Even if we think these goals are very modest, we have to fulfill them: we have a huge social debt with the people of the world that are waiting for concrete results. But the eradication of extreme poverty by 2015 requires an international mobilization of great proportions.

Rich countries should fulfill their promise of dedicating 0.7% of their GNP to development initiatives. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela has for seven years seen the results of constant efforts on the fight against poverty by developing joint actions that allow other countries to share the benefits of our experiences in areas of literacy and access to health. You already know that last year, UNESCO declared Venezuela, a region free of illiteracy, thanks to excellent educational cooperative work between the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. This same experience will be repeated in Bolivia under the government of Evo Morales. Besides, Venezuela and Cuba recently signed an emergency medical assistance agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean Islands. It means treating ophthalmologic disorders of 6 million people in ten years and it is named Mission Miracle. Regarding Mission Miracle, President Chávez and Paraguayan President Nicanor Duarte Frutos, recently signed an agreement for medical assistance for 15,000 Paraguayans in one year. In another initiative, regarding the energy integration of Latin America and the Caribbean Islands, Venezuelan oil income and resources have become instruments in the fight against poverty and in favor of sustainable development.

For these reasons I am more optimistic than ever and so should be all of us. Independently of anyone's political orientations, the evidence is irrefutable. Our country needs deep transformations, that is, a Revolutionary Democracy. We should be clear and know that it is not possible to treat an economically dependent society, deeply indebted, with profound structural problems and 80% poverty with the same formulas and the same policies applied to Northern industrialized countries. Once more, in the same way we do it inside Venezuela, we launch a call to our Northern friends, and especially to Canadians, to develop joint initiatives, respecting our differences and understanding our respective situations.

Until now, Canada and Venezuela have proved that it is perfectly possible to partake in a fraternal collaboration that benefits both countries if the dialogue is based on mutual respect. Historically, Canada has been a source of inspiration and nowadays it is a main interlocutor in the international scene, in the political, social, cultural, economic and environmental arenas. Venezuela, Latin America and the Caribbean in general, need Canada urgently. We share the same foundational principles that allow Canada to restate its adherence to the universal values of progress, peace, self-determination, multilateralism, multiculturalism, independence, freedom and sovereignty. This is another proof that, today, Venezuela holds its place among world democracies. Democracy is not the privilege of rich countries. Also in Latin America and the Caribbean we have the right to be born, to live, to grow up and die in democracy.

Far away from the desperation of those elites who see in everybody's progress the end of their own privileges, far away from the hysteria and the media-created myth that the voice of the powerful is the only one worth listening to, far away from the contradictions of those who day after day, denounce the supposed dictatorship, the tyranny, the communism, the terror, etc, without realizing that their own acts represent the best proof of the absurdity of their statements, far away from the bad faith and the prejudices, I invite you to share our love for Venezuela and to analyze the facts and the reality of our country in its Latin American historical context.

In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, our so-called "crisis" points to a time in history where an exhausted political system, based on Representative Democracy, shows its agony while it is being replaced by a participatory, revolutionary democracy.

Dear friends, we have to reach deep within Latin American and Caribbean political reality, let us understand how under the mundane we can discover the incredible.

Without doubt, we are passing through a difficult stage, but the worst is over. After some years of anguish and pain, I am sure that the Venezuelan people want to retake the building of their Revolution, not a "Quiet Revolution", but a "Pretty Revolution" where each and every Venezuelan has a place and where our true friends will have a place as well.