

The Debate Today is How to Stop The Violent Offensive of the Neoliberal Right-Wing

Venezuela is torn between the destabilising attempts of the right-wing, the limits of the Bolivarian process and the possibility the working class and the popular movements will advance the [revolutionary] project, [but] not without tensions and contradictions.

[The following is] an interview with Franck Gaudichaud, member of the editorial team of Rebelión.org, a doctor of political science and author of several books on Latin America, with a directed research by Michael Löwy on people power and industrial ties under the Allende government in Chile (1970-1973).

How can you characterise the current situation in Venezuela? What is the issue here?

Franck Gaudichaud: As a starting point, we must recognise that we are in the midst of a tremendous global media war against the Bolivarian process. It's therefore essential to create spaces of counter-information. To start with, in front of so much misinformation, we must again emphasise that the Bolivarian process is a long term process of broad social gains (health, education, reducing inequality), democratisation (the new constitution), growing empowerment and inclusion of the popular classes, in a very tense relationship with the charismatic leader that [Hugo] Chavez had been.

This process has also been instrumental in the establishment of new popular national sovereignties in the creation of ALBA, UNASUR and CELAC. Thus, a relapse and a neoliberal regression in Venezuela would have important, immediate collateral

effects on the entire region. All this seems obvious, but it is essential to stress the essential relations and geopolitical forces, [particularly] at a time when the mainstream media, and the Venezuelan opposition are talking about a “Castro-communist dictatorship” and a “genocide in Venezuela ...”

The current situation is extremely tense because the most reactionary sectors of the opposition have wagered on violence and destabilisation from the street. In this context, there is a tendency within the rank and file of the leftists to simplify our understanding of the circumstances, expressing opposition to imperialism or support of the coup against the “fascist” state. To me, this binary reading [of the situation] seems disastrous. Of course, the united manner of the right-wing's “insurrectionist” intentions must be denounced and opposed.

We know that the United States has clear geopolitical interests in this destabilisation. The link between Washington “hawks” and the faction of the opposition led by Leopoldo López in Venezuela isn't a conspiracy theory, but is an objective fact. There is also a real intervention from Colombia and Uribismo, and paramilitary incursions, especially in the border state of Táchira. These factors are important. Now, is there a coup in the style of April, 2002? [...] I think not. Firstly, the real power relations differ from 2002. The armed forces and military chiefs clearly support the government without division – for now – and the big bourgeoisie aren't betting on the violence or an unconstitutional exit [from the Maduro administration]. Fedecámaras and its masters (like Polar's [head, Lorenzo] Mendoza) are participating in the peace conference with Maduro and condemning the violence in the streets. In other words, the key elements of the situation of April, 2002 aren't part of the current situation today. Mind you, there is a sector of the opposition around Leopoldo López that clearly is betting

on street violence [and] calling to overthrow Maduro. Worryingly, this sector has succeeded in holding very significant demonstrations – in the state of Tachira, in Merida with the student movement, but also in the streets of Caracas.

It's true that the participants of these demonstrations essentially come from the wealthy neighbourhoods, from the upper and middle classes; but now [protesters] also come from the less wealthy middle class. Violent sectors have gained space in society, using violence against the workers and barrio militants, constructing barricades (the “guarimbas”); they're responsible for the majority of killings in recent weeks. The neoliberal opposition is partially fragmented, but each [faction of the opposition] plays its role against the [revolutionary] process; from Henrique Capriles or COPEI (Political Electoral Independent Organisation Committee) that say they back dialogue after successive electoral defeats, to parties like Leopoldo López's Voluntad Popular or like the organisation Súmate and the legislator María Corina Machado. [The latter] back the creation of a semi-insurrectionalist climate without awaiting the next elections. Other analysts like Ignacio Ramonet have noted the existence of a “slow coup” based on the destabilisation theories of Gene Sharp.

However, I think from the anti-capitalist left, the key issue isn't just to denounce all this, without also continuing to think “downwards and to the left” in a manner both critical and dialectical; [and] who are the elements within Chavismo that allow such expression of discontent in various strata of society – not just from the student movement. In this sense, we also have to explore the contradictions and weaknesses of the Bolivarian revolution and listen to the critical voices of the popular and revolutionary movement, within and outside of Chavismo. At Rebelión, we have published various Venezuelan authors that go in this direction: Roland Denis, Simón Rodríguez P., Javier Biardeau, Gonzalo Gómez, etc.

What are these main weaknesses of Chavismo?

First you have to differentiate between the governmental Chavismo and the working Bolivarian people. I understand there are tensions here, especially a year after the departure of the central manager of the [revolutionary] process, Hugo Chavez; [who was] capable of oscillating between the vertical leader and the horizontal-ness of popular participation. In the era of "Chavismo without Chavez", Maduro has the legitimacy of electoral democracy. He won the [April, 2013] presidential election in a just manner, and the [December, 2013] municipal elections confirmed a new Bolivarian victory at the ballot box (with 17 victories in 18 elections). But, Maduro doesn't have the charismatic leadership of Chavez, while at the same time a degradation of the economy accelerated. Of course, much is said about insecurity, particularly from the right-wing, though this is also a significant, daily concern for the popular classes. [However,] most of the recent problems appear on the economic level. The Central Bank of Venezuela [BCV] acknowledges a scarcity level of [consumer] goods above 28% and in 2013 inflation of 56% eroded the salaries of the workers. Poor economic and [currency] exchange management reinforces speculation, the black market and hoarding on the part of the bourgeois consumer on a greater scale. Other Marxist economists like Manuel Sutherland or Víctor Álvarez speak of the greatest capital flight from South America. Several Marshall Plans are escaping to Miami.

It's true that inflation and scarcity are products of an offensive from the ruling classes, but they're also [caused by] inefficient economic policy. Corruption is another underlying issue after 15 years of the Bolivarian process. How to pretend to build "socialism of the 21st Century" in these conditions of bureaucratic corruption? Faced with a phenomenon of this nature, a model of petro-rentier capitalism is still hegemonic [i]. It's not enough to have a ministry of "popular power"* [see editor's notes]. I don't see a solution other

than to create control from below, [with] participatory democracy, workers' councils [and a] strengthening of the existing communal councils. Otherwise, how is the right-wing offensive to be lastingly stopped? With dialogue and peace with the ruling sectors, with the Democratic Unity Roundtable [MUD], with [Venezuelan-born media mogul and billionaire Gustavo] Cisneros and the boli-bourgeoisie**? Moreover, remember impunity that continues today for those responsible for the coup of April, 2002 and the April, 2013 killings. The impunity facing the anti-unionist killings that take place in the country are also very concerning, along with the the level of repression against some labour strikes and the growing militarisation of some regions (which caused distress and the distancing of the public from the Bolivarian governor of Tachira). These days, President Maduro and the Attorney General have acknowledged the responsibility of the National Guard and the Bolivarian Police in the death and mistreatment of demonstrators. Hopefully this doesn't go unpunished, because the state has to be the guarantor of basic [human] rights.

Here you have referred critically to the path being taken by the government to stop the right-wing's offensive. For you, what is the most effective way to confront the right-wing?

Without doubt, as proposed by some Venezuelan anti-capitalists, the best defense for the deepening of the revolution and the achievements of the [revolutionary] process is to strengthen a critical, popular and independent view of the bureaucracy or the boli-bourgeoisie, pointing to an empowerment from below. I think this perfectly justifies the intent of the government to pour cold water on the street violence, [and] call for dialogue and peace. Now, dialogue and peace, yes, but for what and with whom? Hopefully, the dialogue prioritises the mobilisation of the popular sectors, the organised workers that search for the paths of popular power, the ... [rural poor and agricultural workers] that want

agricultural reform, the indigenous people, together with more concrete announcements to improve the economic situation. Of course, Maduro has already announced a front to face the "economic war", but as well as the "law of just prices", positively, were measures to adjust [economic policy] and devaluation. To the contrary, small [political] currents like Marea Socialista and others outside Chavismo (libertarians, Marxists [and] Trotskyists) propose dealing with the neoliberal right by taking revolutionary measures: for example, taking control of foreign trade, but with citizen oversight (to prevent corruption), strongly combating speculation and centralising foreign currency exchange, intervening to bring the banking system under social control so that oil revenue isn't partially captured by hoarders, supporting more decisions by the communal councils, [supporting] national food production, [creating] a national, democratic system of planning etc. I emphasise, I'm only reiterating the declarations of Bolivarian collectives and anti-capitalist Venezuelans.

Certainly, progress in this direction also means starting to think about the internal contradictions the popular movement – its weaknesses and limitations, as well as the weight of the political bonapartism present in the PSUV, for example.

What similarities and differences do you find between the process of Chile during the Allende government and that of Venezuela? More than anything, the role of the relationship between the spaces of popular organisation and a state that – despite all the changes – remains a capitalist state.

First, this seems essential to me: there still exists a capitalist state in Venezuela, though with a new institutionalism that's more democratic. Predominantly, [there is] state-rentier capitalism and more than 70% of GDP is in the private sector. To strategically orient [ourselves], first we must know where we stand. Like in Venezuela, in 1973 Chile the Unidad Popular signified great democratic and social

conquests, empowerment from below, as well as support from a very well organised working class on the union and political level. Actually, the big deficiency in Venezuela is the inability to build a democratic movement that is working and union class-conscious, independent of the state bureaucracy. Another interesting aspect of the Chilean experience is the tense relationship between the popular movement and the Allende government. I studied the industrial ties [iii] as sui generis [unique] forms of popular power, and, at various moments, elements were able to stand against Allende and claim revolutionary measures. Another point of debate is just how much we can trust the institutions, the possibility of "using" the state to reform society from above. That is, if we build socialism from the state or build socialism from the popular constituent power, workers' control and citizen participation. When in Venezuela, for example, joint management initiatives [between the state and workers] such as Sidor have been rapidly suffocated. It's the same with the extremely complicated issue of political violence, the role of imperialism and the armed forces.

The fact is that in Venezuela, unlike the Chilean way, the process has been thought as "peaceful, but armed". In Venezuela there is a very different civil-military dynamic [compared] to the Chilean experience. Beyond that, the Bolivarian revolution updates an unresolved debate of Unidad Popular: what can we do with the state, and what kind of state? To what extent are the government [and] elections tools of democratic conquest, and how to support this using grassroots organising to advance. How to deal with the rightists and imperialism from the best relationship that's as strong as possible?

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Editor's notes

*All Venezuela government ministries include the words "Popular Power" in their official titles; eg, Ministry of Popular Power for Education.

** Boli-bourgeoisie (boliburguesía) is a colloquial term mostly used to describe wealthy, corrupt Chavista bureaucrats.

References (in Spanish)

[i] Ver: F. Gaudichaud, "Las tensiones del proceso bolivariano: nacionalismo popular, conquistas sociales y capitalismo rentista", Rebelión, dic. 2012, www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=160554.

[ii] Ver: F. Gaudichaud, Poder popular y cordones industriales en Chile, Santiago, LOM, 2004.