

Contextualizing Venezuela's Parliamentary Elections

***By: Robie Mitchell, Research Associate at the
Council on Hemispheric Affairs***

Venezuelans will elect a new Parliament on December 6th for the first time in five years. If the opposition, the *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD), beats President Nicolás Maduro's *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV), there could be major legislative consequences. Polls currently predict a MUD landslide victory. Venezuela's complex electoral laws, however, favor Maduro's PSUV. Still, while they could narrow the margin of a MUD victory, even with an unfair playing field it appears that only fraud and well-leveraged incumbent advantages could deliver PSUV from defeat. Depending on the margin of victory, ranging from a simple majority to a supermajority, the MUD could do anything from stalling *Chavista* programs to launching a recall election against Maduro. This article on the Venezuelan elections tries to provide an objective analysis on a highly polarized contest that is full of historically grounded acrimony. Though, sifting fact from fiction regarding the various American U.S. interventions is requisite for a holistic and unbiased understanding of any of the other controversies in contemporary Venezuelan politics.

Legacies of U.S. Intervention

On the surface, it might seem that historical developments since the 1950s in the U.S.-Venezuelan relationship are irrelevant to the analysis of Venezuela's parliamentary elections this month. Yet Venezuela's past foreign relations form the basis for many of the legitimate complaints that led to its Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chavez. Nevertheless, accusations against the United States have too often been made indiscriminately and incorrectly, thereby serving to justify anti-democratic measures that have warped the Bolivarian Revolution. In the current election campaign President Nicolás Maduro, Chavez's successor, and the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) has been making arguments similar to the ones that Chávez made in 1998 when he won his first term as president in an electoral landslide.

Despite Chavez and Maduro's hyperbole, they did have valid reasons for staging their Bolivarian "revolution." It was a reaction to limitations on Venezuela's autonomy that was imposed by the United States' gaming Latin American institutions with its power politics. Actions by the United States are often ignored in the United States, while Venezuelan words get amplified by the U.S. media; it is the former that have stymied the development of warmer Venezuelan-U.S. relations. So is impossible to understand either the pitfalls or the truths of the anti-imperialist discourse that characterizes the Bolivarian Revolution without a historical appreciation for the perceived wrongs committed by the United States against Venezuela. Between the overthrow of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958 and the

election of Hugo Chavez as president in 1998, Venezuela was pressured to support the interests of the United States, which stoked resentment that fueled the Bolivarian Revolution¹. Venezuela backed the U.S. counter-insurgency campaigns throughout Latin America during the Cold War². In the 1970s, the Venezuelan government opposed Salvador Allende's constitutional and democratic government in Chile and supported the U.S. invasions in the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Grenada³.

Neo-Liberal Reforms

Many issues contributed to the raw anger that made the Bolivarian Revolution possible; more than any other program or policy, however, neo-liberal reforms adopted during the second term of President Carlos Andrés Pérez Rodríguez, from 1989 to 1993, fed the flames of popular discontentment. Pérez's policies exemplify the influence the United States had over Venezuela's government and the subsequent resentment it stirred. In his first term, from 1974 to 1979, President Pérez Rodríguez supported a statist economic development, so his adoption of neo-liberal doctrines handed down by the International Monetary Fund from Washington came as a surprise—and betrayal—to his supporters. The Washington Consensus codified the neo-liberal reforms President Pérez Rodríguez dutifully accepted; the ten points comprising the Washington Consensus included an obligation from debtor countries to curb budget deficits, broaden tax bases, reduce tariffs, deregulate their economies, and protect private property. Two weeks after he was inaugurated in early 1989, Pérez announced that he would guide Venezuela down a neo-liberal and Chicago School-approved economic path⁴. Pérez defended his sudden flip-flopping, if not his duplicitous timing, saying “times have changed quite a lot in these last fifteen years.”⁵

When President Andrés Pérez enacted a neo-liberal agenda, superficially, his reforms were meant to reinvigorate the “free-market,” but oil and gas companies had substantial influence over how the reforms played out. Neo-liberalist success often requires redistributionist measures, and these did not occur. Falling revenues from oil and rampant corruption that siphoned off state resources could not sustain President Pérez's agenda. Venezuelans had come to terms with the loss of control over their foreign policy (that was the status quo), but Pérez's reforms went too far. Indications that Venezuelans would not put up with their subjugation to foreign interests indefinitely came on February 27, 1989, with a weeklong series of violent clashes in and around the capital city called the *Caracazo*.⁶ Widespread political discontent was set alight when bus fares were increased⁷. The military's suppression of the ensuing protests and riots led to the deaths of more than 1,000 Venezuelans. The attempted 1992 coup, led by Hugo Chavez, Pérez's impeachment in 1993, the banking crisis of 1994, and the collapse of the two mainstream parties were further signals that the U.S.-led order was on its deathbed⁸.

Neo-liberalism seemed especially tone-deaf during the turn of the millennium as a consequence of its catalytic effect on the growth of abject poverty in Venezuela immediately before the Bolivarian Revolution. Latin America as a whole was mired in economic disorder in the 1980s, but the Venezuelan economic downturn was prolonged by an extra decade through the 1990s⁹. Pérez's neo-liberal reforms explain why the Venezuelan economy lagged behind the rest of Latin America at this



time. Some 20.1% of Venezuelan households experienced extreme poverty in 1989, and by 1998 that portion had risen to 28.8%¹⁰. In 1998 the per-capita GDP had reverted to where it was in the 1950s¹¹. In addition to declining personal incomes, state revenues collapsed as well. The price of oil fell to its lowest level in decades. Forces opposing the status quo benefited politically in these “lost decades,” especially the *Chavistas*. Traditional parties, it seemed, had abandoned their fellow countrymen in favor of esoteric economic theories that ignored the realities faced by a downtrodden and neglected people. The Pérez administration’s adoption of a new economic policy under foreign pressure was one thing, but it was something else altogether to stay the course when people’s lived experiences demanded alterations to the Washington Consensus. Chávez’s clever politicking in 1999, when he gained control of the Constituent Assembly, had the end goal of reversing the cruel economic experiments that had been conducted on Venezuela’s economy.

A critique of Pérez’s Washington-influenced flip-flopping regarding neo-liberal reforms is warranted, but the blame that neo-liberalism—and by extension the United States—gets for inflicting economic pain can be overblown. Corruption inside the Venezuelan government did not disappear with Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. Rampant corruption is as guilty as irresponsibly implemented neo-liberal reforms for Venezuelans’ economic suffering. Transparency International, a watchdog group, ranked Venezuela as the country with the 9th severest problem with graft out of 176 countries analyzed¹². Maduro has had several mid-level officials arrested, but his actions to counter corruption have so far been woefully insufficient¹³. Scams involving Ferrominera, a state-owned enterprise that processes and mines iron ore, exemplify the proliferation of corruption throughout Venezuela during Maduro’s time in office. Executives at Ferrominera sold \$1.2 billion of iron ore for a fraction of its true cost in exchange for kickbacks¹⁴. The U.S. role in Venezuela’s stagnation leading up to the Bolivarian Revolution has been hyperbolized by the conflation of the economic pain caused by neoliberalism and that caused by corruption.

Coup or Not?

Conflicting interpretations of the attempted coup of 2002 have caused yet another debate over Washington’s culpability regarding Venezuela’s contemporary problems. *Chavistas* see the failed coup as an American-led intervention to preserve its economic interests in Venezuela. Members of the opposition, resenting the idea that outsiders control them, frame the coup as a domestically fomented attempt to unseat an increasingly authoritarian regime. Reconciliation between these two viewpoints in coming years is unlikely, given that the history is still being written. Certain basic facts about the coup, however, are undeniable. Namely, the United States did spend substantial amounts through its Agency for International Development and its National Endowment for Democracy on democratization in Venezuela, which could have contributed to the mobilization of anti-Chavez protests and ultimately to the coup¹⁵. Globally, the United States spent \$204 million for “civil society promotion,” \$203 million for “governance,” \$147 million for “rule of law,” and \$59 million for “elections and political processes.”¹⁶ Civil society can create and solidify a democracy’s foundations—but in the presence of failing political institutions, an energetic civil society can become destabilizing¹⁷. At best, Washington unintentionally destabilized the Chávez government in its blind pursuit of a dynamic civil society. At



worst, Washington knowingly strengthened Venezuela's civil society in order to incite a coup from within. Neither of the two possible propositions is terribly flattering.

Further justification for anti-American rhetoric sprouts from the idea that regardless of Washington's contribution to the 2002 coup through the subversion of Venezuelan civil society, Washington knew that the coup was about to unfold. A U.S. intelligence brief written on April 6th, five days before the coup, was titled "Conditions Ripening for Coup Attempt"¹⁸. The report states that disgruntled Venezuelan military officers were organizing a coup against Chávez and were planning to arrest him and ten other top-level officials¹⁹. Washington did not let President Chávez know that the Venezuelan army and parts of civil society were planning a coup against him. Even more damning than funding for "democratization" efforts is the U.S. failure to share its evidence that this coup was about to happen in Venezuela. To Maduro, this inaction equates to collusion in the coup.

Sifting legend from reality is an arduous process, but beneath the layers of hyperbole lay two sets of justifications for the anti-American diatribes that Maduro will inevitably direct northwards as the December parliamentary elections approach. His anti-American invectives are not purely political, but instead rooted firmly in historical fact. First, Washington did push for neo-liberal reforms in Venezuela, and the indifferent way in which they were carried out hurt the working classes. Secondly, Washington spent huge sums—ostensibly to mobilize Venezuela's civil society. Whether or not these two actions were malicious is contentious; Maduro clearly believes they were. In any event, U.S. interventions in Venezuela were on balance negative for the Venezuela's society and economy. Unfortunately, blaming the United States has been a trump card of sorts that shuts down rational debate and deflects allegations of corruption. Maduro can cry wolf only so many times before he must acknowledge that the *Chavistas* are now in charge and responsible, more than Washington, for Venezuela's ongoing goods shortages, inflation, and laughable exchange rates. Clinging to spurious arguments, Maduro points towards various U.S. interventions and claims that the United States and local opposition leaders are responsible for these problems.

State of Venezuelan Democracy

There are two features of the debate about the future of democracy in Venezuela that are mistakenly treated assumptions and must be addressed before diving into the question of whether it is possible to objectively analyze Venezuela's democracy. Firstly, it is assumed that democracy can only take one form. This is false since democracy can be split into two main types: liberal and participatory. Although liberal democracy is the kind that is known and praised throughout the West, Venezuelan democracy is participatory. Secondly, it is assumed that every state is held to the same democratic standard. In reality, some states are judged by democracy in theory and others are judged by democracy in practice. In the international media, the United States is judged on practical grounds. Incidents that mar its democracy are seen as exceptions to the rule, not the rule itself. Instead, Venezuela is often judged by its inability to reach idealized and theoretical expectations. Unfortunately, single incidents can render the entire Venezuelan political system undemocratic. Consequently, Venezuela is both assessed as a liberal democracy, when it is really a participatory democracy, and it is held to a higher



standard than other democracies.

When governments violate the human rights of their citizens, the international community usually unequivocally condemns their violations—at least that is how political soft power should ideally be used. But Venezuela may be in a unique position. Its complicated history with the United States and other Western powers means that criticizing the Bolivarian Revolution, Hugo Chávez, or President Nicolás Maduro, is often tantamount to aligning oneself with the far-right opposition. Similar to the contemporary debate over the legacy of U.S. intervention—the first minefield for objectivity—is the debate over whether Venezuela's democracy has suffered a setback with the coming of the Bolivarian Revolution. Assessing if and to what extent Venezuela's democracy has been co-opted is relevant to its elections December 6th. If Venezuela can no longer reasonably be considered a liberal democracy, then the opposition would argue its elections should be considered illegitimate. As with the debate over the United States' legacy in the country, an objective analysis is made difficult by the offences previous generations of American policymakers committed against Venezuela; leaders of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) point to these to dispel criticism of the Bolivarian Revolution. Without shrugging off the Bolivarian Revolution's aims, which include eliminating poverty through greater access to healthcare, food, housing, and education, it is difficult to deny that the means that President Maduro is pursuing to fulfill its ends have had an impact on Venezuela's democracy.

The prosecution of Leopoldo López exemplifies the difficulty of objectively analyzing Venezuelan politics. López is an opposition leader who promoted peaceful protests in 2014. The Venezuelan government alleges that his actions were a call to violence. Amnesty International, a non-partisan organization with a track record of calling out governments for violations of human rights regardless of where they occur, attacked the nearly 14-year prison sentence that was handed down to López recently. The NGO claims that the charges against him were politically motivated and that the findings demonstrate the judiciary's complete lack of independence²⁰. Additionally, according to Franklin Nieves, a former state prosecutor in the López case, some of the evidence against Lopez was fabricated²¹. Agreeing with Amnesty International, however, means being on the same side of the aisle as partisan analysts. For example, Carlos Sabino, an eminent sociologist and historian, paints with a wide and arguably crude brush by arguing that Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff are all in the process of consolidating their governments to establish dictatorships²². The debate over the status of Venezuelan democracy has become so polarized that there is little gray space between the far left and the far right. The polarization makes it difficult to articulate government and opposition positions with any sort of nuance. Differentiating between opportunistic far-right criticisms of fledgling democracies in Latin America that buck international pressures and legitimate concerns over the abuse of power, while difficult, can clarify how democratic Venezuela really is and what lays ahead in the December parliamentary elections.



Defining Participatory and Liberal Democracy

Democracy can be conceptualized in two fundamental and often conflicting ways. Namely, there is a distinction between liberal democracy and participatory democracy. Essentially, liberal democracies protect individual rights and act in accordance with the wishes of what a majority of its people want in regular, fair, and free elections. Participatory democracy is a grass-roots way of looking at democracy that works in a more direct fashion but sometimes tramples on the rights that are sacrosanct to liberal democracies. Before the Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela was nominally a liberal democracy. But, while acknowledging that there were low barriers to vote and a high voter turnout in the run-up to the Bolivarian Revolution, the constricted choices given to Venezuelans made their participation almost meaningless and not very authentic²³. So, in a way, Venezuela's government is now more democratic than it was before the *Chavistas* took office, despite troubling incidents like the López case.

On the other hand, liberal democracy's emphasis on checks on power, property and minority rights, and formal legalistic power structures limiting executive action, are desirable qualities that are frequently lacking in Venezuela's participatory democracy. It is counterproductive to criticize Venezuela's participatory government and label it undemocratic by idealized liberal standards. Rather, it should be judged by how well it fulfills its own participatory promises, not by how well it aligns with a liberal system it has no pretense of being. Venezuela's 1999 Constitution guarantees that Venezuelans will be able to participate in the formulation, execution, and control of government²⁴. Possibly shocking for Western observers who define democracy in their own liberal terms is that it is not always through formal political structures that Venezuelans exercise their right to participate in government. Community organizations play a vanguard role in managing the state's social programs²⁵. Analysis of Venezuelan democracy, then, needs to reflect the deep level of cooperation that exists between the state and society.

Incompatibility between liberal democracy and participatory democracy is the seemingly logical consequence of community organizations' growing power and the corresponding shrinking power of formal state agencies that were outside of Chávez's reach. Chávez himself decided which community groups would get to distribute state resources in their neighborhoods²⁶. He fathered a revolution that bypassed lower-level formal state agents and accrued political support through his role as a patriarch of the state. There may indeed be more spokes on the wheel that connect the government to its people, but with more connections comes a far more rigid hierarchy. All spokes led to Chávez. The resulting concentration of power in a leader's hands alone is something which liberal democracy works to avoid. A lack of restraint on a powerful leader means that nothing but self-abnegation and benevolence stops him from eliminating democracy—whether it is participatory or liberal—altogether. Yet, the assumption that simply because economic goods flowed from the top down after Chávez ascended to power, that his grasp on power was unchallengeable and inherently undemocratic, is a dangerous one to make.

The Venezuelan media are a perfect case study in how flawed this assumption can be. Currently, there are over 30 community television stations and 270 community radio stations²⁷. One of the most highly



regarded and largest stations in Caracas is Catia TV. State employees at Catia TV stand for the Bolivarian Revolution, but are not propagandists. They cover the lives of the poor, gain leadership experience, and influence government to better follow the Bolivarian ideals that it is supposed to fight for, and have regularly challenged Chávez and Maduro along the way²⁸. The state is not necessarily the frightening nexus of power that the West's experiences have led it to assume. While the West battled throughout the twentieth century to control state power, Latin America has historically wrangled with corporate power instead. If Venezuelan media companies should be feared, it should be the private ones, since they helped to foment the social unrest that led to the attempted coup against President Chavez in 2002²⁹. Therefore, although some media companies are state funded, it does not follow that they are repressive agents in Maduro's pocket. Rather, although they have a clear bias, that bias is for the Bolivarian Revolution, which transcends any one individual and is a reaction to abject poverty.

Any contrast of Venezuelan participatory democracy and Western liberal democracy should be rooted in the real world, rather than in idealized definitions. Criticisms of participatory democracy delve into gritty shortcomings. Unfairly, liberal democracy is allowed to stay in the ivory towers of academia, above rebukes from *Chavistas*. Back when Venezuela was a supposedly a liberal democracy, under President Carlos Pérez Rodríguez's second term, which lasted until 1993, it was dominated by corporate capital³⁰. The Bolivarian Revolution would not have occurred, or been necessary, had not Venezuela's liberal democracy under President Pérez been riddled with fatal flaws. Chávez's push to create a constitution with a strong president allowed him and Maduro, his successor, to crowd out other political actors, both in official political parties and in civil society³¹. Realistically, political participation would have been required for these other actors to be crowded out in the first place. Leading democratizing forces established the *puntofijista* system after the overthrow of the dictatorship in 1958. During the *puntofijista*, the power of political actors that were not political parties steadily eroded.

The *puntofijista* eventually gave rise to a massive gulf between liberal democracy in theory and liberal democracy in practice. Accordingly, any critique of the demise of liberal democracy in Venezuela needs to consider the shortcomings of the system in place before the Bolivarian Revolution, and must not pretend that people had equal access to political recourse. *Acción Democrática* and *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI) were the founding parties behind the *puntofijista*. Their interests were so entrenched and so divergent from their constituents that Chávez termed the nominally liberal democratic system in place before his election a "party-archy"³². Venezuela's high poverty rate and growing inequality in the years before the Bolivarian Revolution are evidence that indeed party-archy had replaced liberal democracy. Venezuelans lacked recourse to respond to their government's consistent failure to adopt policies in line with public opinion. Without accountability, how can a government claim to be founded on liberal principles?



Inadequacies of Venezuelan Democracy

A defense that participatory democracy and liberal democracy are incongruous might allow for some limitations on private economic freedom, but it cannot justify the limits on political freedom enacted by Maduro's administration. Just as liberal democracy failed to live up to its promises in the run-up to the Bolivarian Revolution, Chavez and Maduro's implementation of participatory democracy has also fallen short of its own idealized definition if it tries to silence the opposition before the election. Brazil's Superior Electoral Tribunal (TSE) announced in October that it was ending its mission to monitor Venezuela's elections³³. The TSE expressed concerns over the rejection by Venezuelan authorities of Nelson Jobim, a judge in President Lula de Silva's administration³⁴. Trying to keep out electoral observers is undemocratic—by liberal or participatory definitions. Without monitors from Latin America, any opposition claim that this month's elections will not be free or fair will have more credibility. On December 6th, when Venezuelans go to the polls for their parliamentary elections they effectively will be conducting a referendum on participatory democracy and the Bolivarian project as a whole. Venezuela's current government needs to remain true to its own principles of participatory democracy through free and fair elections.

By: Robie Mitchell, Research Associate at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs

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