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Venezuela

The lessons of Chavismo

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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The third anniversary of the death of the late President Hugo Chávez on March 5 was the occasion for several articles assessing 18 years of Chavista government in Venezuelaâ€”15 of them with Chávez in power and the last three under his successor, Nicolás Maduro.

César Romero is a member of the youth wing of the revolutionary socialist organization [Marea Socialista](#) (MS), which has been involved with the Chavista process from the start in the late 1990s. MS joined the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), founded by Chávez in 2007 and led by Maduro today, but left it last year. In this interview, Romero talked to Eva MarÃ-a, providing a socialist perspective on the political process in Venezuela over two decades, and on the "Pink Tide," as the series of left governments that came to power in Latin Americaâ€”[and now are receding, by most accounts](#)â€”are known.

How does Marea Youth assess the political course of these last 18 years?

The assessment of the 15 years under Chávez's leadership is different from the assessment of the last three years since Maduro took power. The death of the late president marked the beginning of a new phase. But as for the years that Chávez was in power, I would summarize them as follows: it was a progressive and highly contradictory period.

It was progressive for two fundamental reasons. The first reason is that Chávez's rise established a key social and political dynamic in the country based on the mobilization and promotion of popular democratic participation at the national level. Through social mobilization, the government has been pushed to take measures that favored the people. Sometimes, even Chávezâ€”after implementing regressive measures such as, for example, the increase in the sales taxâ€”had to retreat because the people mobilized to pressure him.

The second reason is that there was a change in the pattern of capital accumulation in the oil industry, which is the main source of wealth in Venezuela. Chávezâ€”after winning important political victories such as the Enabling Law, [the defeat of the 2002 coup against him](#), thanks to popular resistance, [the defeat of the bosses' oil strike](#) and the defeat of the recall referendumâ€”emerged as the sole political entity who defined how the country's oil revenues were to be distributed. And no one could challenge his decisions because those victories were won with millions of people in the streets. This new way of sharing the oil wealth thus had a popular character.

These two factors consolidated a new regime in Venezuela, in which Chávez was the undisputed leader, and there was a new social dynamic at the national level, where people are in constant dialogue with the government.

Thus, I characterize this period as a positive one because there was a lot of investment and a substantial increase in the quality of life for most Venezuelans. Concrete examples of this are the drastic reduction of extreme poverty and the fact that 98 percent of the population is now able to eat three times a day and have a balanced diet.

Venezuela had one of the highest average salaries in Latin America. This was a period when the Venezuelan working class has had the capacity to accumulate some savings and to live a better quality of life in general.

However, the assessment is not only positive. We must understand that there were some revolutionary changes during his time, but there was never a socialist revolution.

Chávez, as a leader of the state, made some important mistakes. Among these were his hyper-leadership role, which consequently led to a lack of collective leadership of the process and the bureaucratization of politics. This facilitated the consolidation of an important bureaucratic caste that Chávez never tried to stop. At the same time, the government didn't promote consistent anti-capitalist politics.

This bureaucratic caste consolidated state power and was able to accumulate capital rapidly through government contracts and deals with private and transnational companies. In just a few years, a new social class of business owners took shape. It was popularly known as the "Bolibourgeoisie" (the "Bolivarian" bourgeoisie).

Chávez proposed a new economic model consisting of a mixed economy, but one in alliance with the needs of the Venezuelan business class, a parasitic class since it relies on oil revenue. This deepened the country's dependency on oil income. For businessmen, it's always much cheaper to import than to invest because they then can obtain dollars much more easily.

The logic of implementing this model for Chávez was that, in his view, it would encourage the business class to invest more in internal production. But this never happened. Thus, we get to the alarming situation where 98 percent of our export income is from the oilfields, with 2 percent from everything else. This difference had never been so great.

Another problem was having the wrong international policy, where Chávez allied himself with friendly governments, while ignoring the people's struggles in those countries.

We did achieve important victories in the international arena, such as the defeat of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas [Chávez led the opposition to the FTAA treaty, which was rejected by most Latin American countries at the Fourth Summit of the Americas in 2005—it was one of the most significant anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal developments during Chávez's time in power], the Petrocaribe initiative [providing lower-priced oil to numerous Caribbean nations taking part in the Venezuela-led Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas], etc. But the model of international solidarity that Chávez started fell apart when he died, because he only made commitments to the governments, and not to the people struggling in those countries.

Finally, another mistake was the fact that Chávez's politics were very state-centered, and that greatly limited what he could do. The Venezuelan state is a capitalist institution, and for this reason, it always remained a clientelist and paternalist institution, not a revolutionary one.

It is for all of these reasons that I would say that the assessment is progressive but highly contradictory.

What has changed with Maduro coming to power?

With Maduro, there was a political change in relation to Chávez's regime that accelerated after the "peace talks" of 2014 [negotiations between the government and key business leaders in 2014 that Maduro convened in response to a wave of protests and violence led by middle- and upper-class youth demanding his resignation].

After Chávez's death the year before, his political authority, which had assured an equitable distribution of oil revenue, also came to an end. With Chávez out of the way, all of the historical sectors that had always benefitted from oil wealth wanted more. And now the new bureaucracy wanted more, too.

This forced Maduro to make a decision: he either had to radicalize the process to preserve the support of its social

base, or he had to make alliances with the dominant political and economic sectors to stay in power. Unfortunately, he opted for the latter. This resulted in a deepening crisis for the neediest, since the easiest way to maximize revenue is by cutting back on the social programs that had been achieved in prior years.

New anti-popular measures were implemented: Tax cuts for leading businesses, easier access to dollars, and the establishment of new Special Economic Zones in strategic regions, where companies don't have to abide by labor laws or pay any taxes.

What's more, we've gone from having the highest salaries in Latin America to one of the lowest. Maduro is set on keeping up with payments on the national debt, which, as of next year, is going to reach the frightening number of \$12 billion, a completely unsustainable amount. Marea Socialista has also uncovered how [capital flight has taken \\$250 billion out of the country in the last few years](#).

And with plummeting oil prices, the government is accelerating the extraction of other natural resources, including mining, which seriously harms the enormous biodiversity of some of the oldest and richest lands in the country and the world, such as the well-known Angel Falls. The distribution of oil revenue is thus losing the character of being "for the people."

All of this led to a dramatic decline in Maduro's popularity, to which the government is responding with authoritarian measures. This never happened with Chávez. The state is restricting the democratic rights of parties like ours. We still haven't been recognized as a legal party. There is also more repression in poor neighborhoods, always with the pretext that the state has to fight drugs and crime.

The crisis has been going on for years, but things are now worse than ever. The main difference between Chávez's government and Maduro's is that with Chávez, when there was a crisis, workers never paid the consequences. With Maduro, it's always the workers who suffer the most.

This is why I separate the two assessments. So far, the assessment of Maduro's time in government is a negative one.

Let's talk about the current crisis. How would you describe a day in the life of an ordinary Venezuelan, compared to how it was in earlier years?

It's unbearable. Wages are deteriorating extremely rapidly. There is a lack of basic necessities, which is important because the government has reduced imports by as much as 30 percent from 2012 levels. Social conditions are very bad, and the sense of insecurity has increased dramatically. There are also signs of new diseases, the reappearance of extreme poverty.

You can certainly feel it in the streets. All public services are eroding. And to top it off, we are experiencing a drought, and 70 percent of our energy comes from hydropower. It's possible that, unless it rains, we will not have electricity in three weeks. The discontent is very palpable.

What would you say are the main factors responsible for this crisis?

In short, the list includes: capital flight, giving away dollars to international companies, the Special Economic Zones, the government's zealous payment of the national debt, increases in the prices of basic products as subsidies are withdrawn, corruption, the rentier economic model, and plummeting oil prices.

Can you talk about the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)? What kind of party is it, and how does it work? Maduro says it's a revolutionary party. How does Marea see it?

The first problem is that socialism in one country doesn't exist. This was one of the worst mistakes that the leadership of this party has made since the beginning.

Currently, the PSUV is identified with the minimal social base that receives a series of benefits from the government, and it's the political structure of a caste that has consolidated itself within the state. It is not socialist or revolutionary, because there is no room for popular participation. It squashes criticism, it criminalizes everybody who disagrees with it, etc.

The PSUV is just an apparatus of the government. Everything that the government says, the PSUV supports with empty rhetoric. It offers no proposals to overcome the crisis, and what's worse, its local, regional and national leaderships live in a bubble totally detached from the everyday lives of the Venezuelan people.

This caste doesn't experience the crisis. They live with ostentatious privileges that separate them entirely from the people, which explains why their speeches don't connect with what most people are actually going through. This is why the government [suffered such a decisive defeat in the December 6 National Assembly elections](#).

Was the PSUV always like this?

No, when we entered the party, there was a total of 4 million or 5 million militants who participated in community assemblies of hundreds of people.

But as time wore on, the PSUV became a party of the caste, and the vehicle by which the leadership negotiates and reaches agreement with the leading opposition figures and with the traditional right wing in Venezuela. The party has lost all its participatory and democratic character.

MAREA was part of the PSUV from its foundation in 2007 until last year. How does MS assess its decision to enter the PSUV, and what is its current perspective?

MAREA participated in the founding congress of the PSUV, as well as the first congress of the PSUV youth. In all of these, we had representatives, and we made proposals.

Later on, in 2014, at the Third Extraordinary Congress of the PSUV, we also presented a document, even though some of our members had been expelled from the party, and we as an organization had not been invited.

[In that 2014 document](#), we said that the party either had to change its course towards the revolutionary left, or it was going to be finished as a true party of the people. They [PSUV leaders] didn't allow us to participate. At that same time, they also expelled and put under discipline some leaders who had criticized the party. These leaders are now closer to us.

We decided to enter the PSUV because it incorporated a big part of the vanguard that was leading the most important events of the process until that time. There are cadre who broke from the PSUV and joined Marea. These comrades help us to gain a greater hearing because we consistently did what we said we were going to do.

The assessment, therefore, is a positive one. It was the right decision to be a part of the PSUV at the beginning, and it was also appropriate to leave it last year. Some say that we left it too late, but we see it more as our way of understanding the process that the people go through. The idea wasn't just to leave on our own, but to show, too, how the PSUV was no longer working politically.

During its inauguration last January, the opposition Roundtable of Democratic Unity—the alliance of center and right-wing parties in Venezuela, known as the MUD, which won a big victory in last year's elections, giving it a strong majority in parliament—declared that its main objectives would be the freeing of "political prisoners" and removing Maduro as head of state sometime this year. Could you tell us who these so-called "political prisoners" are, and why they are in prison? Do you think the MUD is going to achieve its goals?

The political prisoners that the opposition refers to are people who opted to promote violence to overthrow both Chávez's and Maduro's governments. In some cases, these movements had an almost fascist feel. The demand to release these prisoners is coming only from the right wing. It's clear that the law that MUD is proposing would absolve everybody who has been involved in drug cases, corruption and violent provocations.

On the possibility of Maduro's removal, it's going to be very hard for the opposition to win this because it has not yet consolidated political power. What it did consolidate in January was its electoral base, but that has not yet transformed into real power.

There is currently an institutional conflict between the Supreme Court of Justice—appointed by the previous assembly—and the new assembly. Anything that the National Assembly puts forward, the Supreme Court of Justice blocks it.

They can't get rid of the government if they don't have huge crowds in the streets who are ready to back them up. I think that is complicated. People want Maduro to leave, but they don't trust the opposition either.

In relation to the phenomenon of the Pink Tide, what is the connection between the crisis in Venezuela and others elsewhere in Latin America? How do you see the current situation?

One of the main factors in the crisis is represented by Chávez's death. In Latin America since 2000, there were two projects being contested: Chávez's project, which sought Latin American integration to counter U.S. and European imperialism, with victories such as the defeat of the FTAA, the exit of the Andean community, proposals such as the Bank of the South, etc.—and [former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's project, one more linked with financial capital, the extraction of natural resources by transnational companies and the creation of Mercosur.

Chávez was, of course, influenced by Lula's ideas as well—that was one of the moments of retreat in Venezuela. But I'm talking about contesting projects, because Chávez served to mobilize the people of Latin America against imperialism.

With his death, the crisis accentuated because in his absence, a period of stalemate emerged, which coincided with the impact of the worldwide economic crisis hitting South America. There has been a huge drop in the price of commodities—not just oil—and that has brought an increase in debt servicing in Argentina and Brazil, the most important countries of Latin America economically.

So we see the current conjuncture this way: The end of the progressive cycle known as the Pink Tide is apparent, as we've seen with the electoral defeats for Evo in Bolivia, Kirchner in Argentina and Maduro here in Venezuela—plus

we will see how things develop with Dilma in Brazil.

At the same time, new cycles of popular mobilization have arisen, mostly around environmental issues, racism, LGBTQ rights, etc. These issues have an anti-capitalist character because they are focused on the government. These struggles, however, exposes the weaknesses of the traditional left-wing parties that implemented progressive measures only halfway during the previous cycle. They had an opportunity to create an alternative to the politics of the right, and yet they didn't do it. Nor are they going to do it.

That's what we, as the revolutionary left, have left to do. We have to create that alternative.

Is that the new task that Marea Socialista has set for itself?

Yes. Our strategy is to try to create an alternative political pole of attraction at the national level. That's the only way we see to overcome the crisis: building that alternative because the two mainstream parties (PSUV and MUD) dominate national politics. Because of this, nobody sees alternative proposals. Since this is now a problem of a structural crisis, you have to aspire to become part of the government.

So yes, together with other critical sectors of Chavismo, that is our task. The revolutionary left, whether in Venezuela or in any of the other "Pink Tide" countries, has to break from those parties which, throughout this cycle, have abandoned the side of the popular classes.

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