

On Popular Power in Venezuela

Uruguayan Anarchist Federation

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“The Popular Power in Venezuela, initially pushed by charismatic Hugo Chavez, has been in a constant tension ... From above, resources have been cut, and they have hindered, in every possible way, the development of Communes and the Popular Power.”

Venezuela

In 1989 Venezuela lived one of the biggest social uprisings known as “El Caracazo.” The motivation of this popular revolt was the measures taken by the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, who gave over the Venezuelan economy to the International Monetary Fund and implemented a shock policy of explicit neo-liberal nature. Thus, the country’s existing economical crisis was deepened and the balance of this huge popular protest was 3,000 dead.

The appearance in the political arena of nationalist military figure Hugo Chavez, first through a failed coup, then developing a prominent election campaign and winning these elections [in 1999], brought together and channeled all of the popular enthusiasm which had been momentarily silenced with gunshots. The Venezuelan political system, completely corrupt, did not offer any way out through the two traditional political parties of the country, Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI. They couldn’t develop any proposal which could be considered as valid. The patches that the capitalist system needed in Venezuela would be finally applied, through a complex process, by Chavez.

This popular adhesion can also be translated in the fact that several leftist groups, and even ex-guerrilla fighters, surrounded the now President Chavez. His own brother, a former member of the Communist Party, was beside him. Moreover, it was his brother who had a decisive influence so that Chavez joined the army in order to carry out certain political work inside the institution.

So 2002 arrived, and with it came the attempted coup of AD and COPEI, along with Fedecámaras, an entity which gathers all of the business owners of the country. There was also the sabotage of the oil industry. Millions of people descended from the hills to defend Chavez and what they had gained and had been denied for centuries. There was also a hope placed in the new government with Hugo Chavez as its leader.

Why there was so much support from the people? Chavez’s government represented having food guarantees, plus some urgent benefits and social rights that were very wanted. After the failure of the coup, the Chavista government deepens several plans, the so-called “Missions” in the first place, “Barrio Adentro” and “Mercal”, putting to work 28 missions in the year 2010, which helped to eliminate illiteracy, provide health care and fulfill basic needs for all of the population. The name “Popular Power” emerges and citizens organized from working-class neighborhoods, even creating their own militias. There is an emergence of production and consumer cooperatives, communes and quite a wide regional organization created from below. All of this with a great autonomy at a social level, since the State – regarding the governmental aspects – still had certain control over the old bureaucracy which had supported the coup.

Of course, the Chavista government had used the “Popular Power” slogan but orchestrated such from the top in trying to build new institutions in the capitalist State, but functional to their project and also to their conception of State. It is true that an important leading role at a popular level emerged, which is impossible to deny, and that for a moment, and at a certain level,

a parallel society was organized with organisms of real Popular Power, which initially had little to no intervention from the State. Many radical militants joined this activity of Popular Power and, in the heart of the people, they raised the need of independence from the organism of the state and struggling for their own objectives.

Clearly though the State only creates bureaucracy and a new bourgeoisie. In the space of a few years, former militants and some upstarts began taking control of different aspects of the State and started to integrate and enrich themselves. This phenomenon is known as “bolirricos” [a play on words between Bolivarian and rich -Translator]. One can say the same about the military caste of senior Army officers, who have won benefits as never before. This process was accompanied by a certain level of corruption.

All of this happened in the middle of nationalizations, with PDVSA as the most important, through which the Venezuelan State takes control of the oil, consolidating Venezuela as one of the main exporters of crude oil as they took advantage of the high prices of the last decade. It is a messy process. There is no social experiment in its pure form. In this context, the popular communes coexist with the army, Chavista communes with a certain level of independence, militant sectors working class with different levels of support to Chavismo representing millions who have enriched themselves at the expense of the people and through corruption. There are always traditional bourgeoisie who have shown some interest in Chavismo to adapt to the new situation and take advantage of it. The majority of them are willing to turn to the other side when their stingy interests tell them to.

Nonetheless, something that cannot be denied is the fact that, however messy the Venezuelan process is, an important part of the people, those from below, participates in the construction of something which is opposed to capitalism and the imperialist penetration of the United States – they build new social relations, self-manage part of the production, services and social life by themselves.

In essence, it is against this self-management and forward-motion from the real Popular Power – from below – and against the accomplished conquests, against that general anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist feeling, that the dominant classes of Venezuela have stood along with the Yankee imperialism, where the government of Trump, just like Obama’s, has been playing through international pressure and a specific economic blockade. They have taken advantage of a situation in which the Chavista government has some level of an important popular discontent because of its inability to solve essential problems such as food, medicines and a brutal raise of the cost of living. The right wing, the bourgeoisie and the imperialist mechanisms in action have deepened the crisis in every way and have even created and recreated this situation. All of this happens in a time when the Venezuelan government has also completely minimized its connection with those from below who supported it.

Venezuelan communes

In 2013 there was a register of 1,150 communes and 31,670 communal councils. Through the Communal Councils, the people solve their issues directly and take part in social infrastructure works using the resources from the State destined to these councils. They are the grounds and the base of Popular Power.

These Communal Councils work on the basis of neighborhood assemblies, where they set out vindications, but also organize to set several tasks and develop social work and the infrastructure of the neighborhoods. These communes were created as of 2009 and were developed by Chavez before his death to be the lead agency of the revolution, in a self-governed and self-managed way. In his discourse, he talked about independence from the State and political parties, even the chavista party.

The Communes have even assumed the administration of whole neighborhoods, including the allocation of food and primary health, housing construction, infrastructure works such as bridges, and they have managed different problems of the population. They have been a real organism of democracy and direct participation. Nevertheless, in a sustained and increasing manner, they have been restrained from above, from the top of the Chavista government, who obstruct the Council's actions, make sure they depend on state and bureaucratic organisms, and delay the approval of laws to provide resources, protect and benefit the Communes' actions.

You can find an example of how a Commune works in the case of Ataroa, which gathers about fifty Commune Councils in the south of Barquisimeto (the fourth biggest city in the country) and some other social groups. In this place, it was created, among other small businesses, a brick factory which provides materials for the works carried out in these neighborhoods. This Commune has also assumed the management of an urban transport system with eight buses and a television channel, Lara TV. It adds an active element for this Commune through which people solve their issues in a natural way, but: "The experience has not been without internal and external problems, rivalries to seize certain power, bureaucracy, and conflicts with other State institutions."

We see, therefore, that the Popular Power in Venezuela, initially pushed by charismatic Hugo Chavez, has been in a constant tension with the State, the party in the government, the Bolivarian bourgeoisie, Army and all of the caste of bureaucrats that have found a position in the State and grabbed a little piece of power and oil revenue. From above, resources have been cut, and they have hindered, in every possible way, the development of Communes and the Popular Power, because the growth of this experience implies, by itself, a strong contradiction with the State and the dominant power. This is a conflict that will not be solved peacefully, with no traumas, no ruptures, as many theorists would like. On the contrary, as history shows us, class conflicts and interests, when a process emerges from below with popular power, resolve through violence. Chavismo is not really aligned with this line of rupture with the capitalist system.

The right wing, the crisis, and the role of the United States

Without a doubt, for the putrid Venezuelan right, things had gone too far. After the failed coup of 2002, little by little, the right rebuilt its forces and has returned for its privileges after Maduro took office. Strikes, shortages produced by the bosses, among them the owners of Polar – a group which focuses in food – among others. On the heels of the popular discontent, the right gets a majority in the National Assembly. In that place, it will try politics and techniques of destabilization and pressure in order to oust President Maduro. Thus, ultimately, it intends to oust the Chavista regime. "Personalities" of this Assembly belonging to the MUD (Mesa de Unidad Democrática or Democratic Unity Coalition) tour the world and maintain contact with political leaders and coup-supporting organizations from the US and Europe, willing to play the most interventionist card as possible in Venezuela.

Then, the “guarimbas” [street blockages -Translator] and the strategy of seizing the streets and causing as much destabilization as possible with different methods.

The American support to the destabilization caused by the Venezuelan right has been total. There have been many imperialist organisms which give economical support to the coup-inducing actions carried out by the MUD. The CIA of the United States funds these actions through different organisms such as the National Endowment for Democracy, a secondary agency which diverts funds of the CIA toward different NGOs and groups promoting boycotts and isolation of Venezuela. They call for “democracy” but they have no “democratic” component, and with the excuse of demanding “Human Rights,” they try to destabilize the political and social situation of Venezuela. This is a task that these groups carry out systematically in all Latin America and which adapt to the current situation.

Let’s take Provea as an example, which is an NGO linked to the topic of “Human Rights”, and is funded by organizations such as the Open Society Foundation – which belongs to multimillionaire and financier George Soros – Ford Foundation, the United Kingdom Embassy, the European Union, among other embassies and different groups. Probably, the European Union is worried about the Human Rights of the Venezuelan people and other Latin American countries, but not about the millions of immigrants that arrive to their coasts enduring a painful misery, as a product of the wars they have caused in Africa and the Middle East, after having looting such territories for over two centuries.

Everything is documented. It’s not just a notion. There are data, reports, proof of the Yankee funding to the Venezuelan opposition, which only wants to carry out a coup. An opposition which is deeply against the people. Their intentions are to install the pure and hard line neo-liberal model such as the one underway in Argentina and Brazil, taking popular conquests away and spreading more poverty.

Also, in the political aspects being developed in Venezuela since years ago, it is in fact nothing less than the same plan carried out in Chile to overthrow the government of Allende in 1973 and to impose the fierce dictatorship of Pinochet, or to defeat the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua during the 1980’s. Of course, it is a plan that needed certain adjustment according to the historical context, but it is the same model. The resemblance even attracts the attention.

Naturally, there were several responses in the Maduro government. Some of the political calculations are not entirely correct and their results are uncertain. They did not properly face the serious internal situation, in which the people lacked essential things, and the enormous speculation there was around this tragic setting. On the other hand, the government wore out the argument of the Imperialist conspiracy until it almost lost its proper effect. That is a fact that the infiltration devices and the imperialist action tried to take advantage of in order to fake innocence.

Finally, the election was called for the National Constituent Assembly. For its composition, several social organizations were called in a timid way to be part of the assembly. In spite of the limitation of their participation, the popular organizations revitalized their action in pursuit of this integration. There are indicators that these felt once again considered in the ongoing project, which gave new birth to some hopes and provided certain social life to those who felt somehow distant. Even though they had some criticism, they carried out activities in favor of this constituent organization. Maybe thinking that once under its wing they could achieve some favorable social effects and some corrections.

This was a political strategy of the Maduro government under pressure, which was opposed to another one that had gained the streets and deployed actions in different fields, including international matters. A political strategy that was briefly submerged into controversy about its legal legitimacy. The context in which the topic was solved was not judicial, it was political, and was about who would continue or take control of the government. Neither of the parts involved was really worried about the legal authenticity.

Those from below spoke

This political and economic crisis, backed by the coup-monger right-wing and by the US, had another response. It seemed like the Venezuelan people in general were not mobilizing, that they didn't find the way to restrain this coup-mongering surge, but in the regional elections of last October 15th, the popular majority "spoke" and rejected, in their own way, the right-wing and the coup-mongering, which resulting in the victory of the Chavista candidates in 17 out of 23 states. The people spoke in the elections, although not in the street and resumed activities of Popular Power – which is what ultimately matters – but without a doubt, this is an indication that something from below, something in the popular structure was developed, is there and is expressed. There is subjectivity at a popular level, with confusing and contradictory elements, it's true, but indicating that "something" of this Popular Power lives and functions. "Something" out of all of this experience is there, fresh, alive and demanding, still without stumbling, its space and place in history.

In the elections, the right wing could not prove there was fraud or anything like it. They were left without solid ground, but the truth is that the Venezuelan people chose this peculiar way of making themselves heard and trying to maintain the essence of a process in which they have a voice, although today it seems to be expressed in a contradictory, messy and, at times, faked way. Therefore, "something" of this popular prominence, ideological elements – the production and distribution of goods, the self-defense of communities – are present and it is not mere propaganda. It is clear that these elements should take action in a complex and, for now, hardly favorable frame.

Nevertheless, "something" out of all of this process has a hint of reality. There are people in Latin America that dream and take action in order to build "something" different from the society we live in. That "something" may evolve in one way or another. It depends on the popular support from below and on Latin American peoples to make this "something" transform into a strong popular path to achieve real Popular Power with no tutelage from the State; and with a socialist horizon in its stare.

Historical and social processes are not perfect, they're not a laboratory practice. They don't come out of a manual. They are contradictory, messy, highly complex, with each people's own culture and history. But they belong to the peoples, the oppressed, those who have been exploited and suffered from looting and the violation of all of their rights, persecutions, death, imprisonment, torture. Those experiences of pain and hope can make a breakthrough, a rupture, and be the source of a new course.

Furthermore, when the right wing comes to take it all, when the most imperialist power of the world intervenes to bury even more what they consider their "backyard", we can't hesitate about what side we are on. It is not about the defense of this or that government. For the anarchists

of the FAU (Uruguayan Anarchist Federation), the center of the debate is how the peoples from Latin America can move forward toward our complete emancipation and liberty and how we create strong peoples and move toward the development of Popular Power.

IN VENEZUELA: NO YANKEES, NO BUREAUCRATS, NO GUSANOS

For the self-determination of the people

POPULAR POWER FROM BELOW!!

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The political situation in Venezuela continues to be embattled and the legacy of Chavismo is one that remains contested and debated on the left. We republish this translated statement by the Federación Anarquista Uruguaya (FAU) with their perspectives on the current situation (original link). Founded in 1956 the FAU was one of the strongest anarchist movements in Latin America, survived the period of dictatorship and continues to be active today. We also recommend other translated pieces on Venezuela, "The 'Madurization' of Chavismo" a statement by Caribbean anarchists and an analysis by Chilean anarchists who conducted political research in Venezuela, "Political Situation in Venezuela: Crisis, Trends, and the Challenge of Class Independence."

Translation by Ricardo Araya.

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