

Depolarization and Autonomy

Challenges to Venezuela's social movements after Chavez's election

Rafael Uzcategui

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Chavez's original movement...becomes the face of the people's malcontent, achieving legitimacy at the polls in 1999 by capitalizing on the prevailing wish for change that ran through the country, but also revitalizing the populist, statist and caudillista ethos so much a part of Venezuela's historical make-up.

The imposition of a personal mode of domination was preconditioned to the break up of the citizen-led dynamics that brought it to power. Among the many causes driving this process there is the polarization imposed by the contending elites: those banned from power representing the traditional productive sectors, and the new "leftist" bureaucracy giving legitimacy to the interests of those sectors crucial to the economic globalization of the country.

After 1999 the social fabric is fragmented (neighborhood, student and ecologist movements), neutralized (human rights) and co-opted (indigenous, women, counterculture) by the expectations created by a government rhetorically of the left. In turn this has caused some expression of popular organization with no autonomy within a new network of clients, amidst one of the greatest economic windfalls ever, brought on by the high oil prices.

These popular initiatives, instructed from above, have some common elements that distinguish them from other social movements:

- (1) Vertical solidarity supplants intra-class solidarity: mobilizations follow a political agenda imposed by the top; their calls for solidarity when others in the movement suffer repression are almost non-existent.
- (2) An identity permeated by personality cult and a lack of history and arguments different from those originating in the seat of power, which prevents any hypothetical "deepening of the revolution".
- (3) Their praxis aims to legitimize government's projects, without any other parallel or different process.
- (4) A progressing wearing out due to its adoption of politico-electoral cumulative logic.

Default on the expectations generated by Chavez has caused the exponential increase of popular protests during 2006, something that will continue to grow in the coming year. But it is precisely the blackmail of polarization—"to give weapons to the right," "manipulated by imperialism"—which contain the growing discontent against a state that neither transformed itself when it could, nor has a new bureaucracy able to make policies different from Latin American populist welfare.

The challenges facing the social movements, after the hypothetical presidential re-election, are not only of a practical order such as its autonomous configuration or experimenting with diverse practices and spaces of learning and counter hegemony. They are also theoretical.

Overcoming imperialist Manichaeism, centered exclusively on George Bush, would entail squeezing the multiple dynamics of money flow and the power of global capital. It is precisely the social movements, from both poles, which have internalized the discipline of being a cheap energy exporting country, in spite of any consideration for the environment, deepening in the role assigned to Venezuela by economic globalization.

Sticking to the events of the last few months—actions against coal exploitation in Zulia, protests by street vendors in Caracas and traditional fishermen in Guiria—and how they have been opposed and criminalized by Chavez's

rank and file, we foresee a long period of conflict among the oppressed: some protesting for a few structural improvements and others opposing them to climb up to positions within the hierarchy of those embedded in the personal state.

Rafael Uzcategui can be reached at **uzcategui — dot — rafael — at — gmail — dot — com**

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