

Series Bolivarian Venezuela at the crossroads (Part 2): Debate and contradiction in the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela)

Thursday 20 May 2010, by [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 24 June 2010).

During the 2007 constitutional referendum, one might have thought that the party created by Hugo Chávez in 2006 was stillborn since fewer people voted 'Yes' than the number of people officially enrolled in the party. [1] But this impression was partially belied in the following months: grassroots meetings multiplied, which resulted in the nomination of candidates for the municipal elections and for governors of the 23 states that make up Venezuela. However, the process is contradictory. While participation from the party's rank and file was active and effective and while grassroots members did appoint candidates for the elections, the fact stills remains that when it came to the party's executive board, ordinary members could not vote for all the leaders and Chávez himself put his government's ministers in the party's key posts (for example, the 8 vice-presidents of the PSUV). This creates a regrettable confusion between the State, the government, and the party.

In this respect some voices have been raised within the PSUV to challenge the fact that the party's management and coordination are left to the ministers who are already overloaded with their governmental mission. Moreover their position as ministers gives these leaders the power to disproportionately influence the decisions taken by the party. It is also easier for them to influence some party members when the latter are called to the polls. A critical view, shared by a substantial number of activists, was expressed by Martha Harnecker as follows: "One of the things that surprise us and, I imagine, must shock people abroad, particularly in Europe, is that the State is the instrument with which the party is built. It is in clear contradiction with our vision of the party." [2]

Gonzalo Gómez, a PSUV activist and co-founder of Aporrea, also shows concern regarding the relationship to be built between the party and popular power (which he also calls "the constituent player"): "The party can seek to propose and give direction, accompanying social movements in the building up of popular power, but it cannot subjugate popular power: in other words subjugate this constituent player by the constituted power." [3]

BOX

Communal councils: when "constituent power" challenges constituted power

The law entitled Ley de los consejos municipales (LCC) [4] was voted without any genuine debate on 7 April 2006. Its article 3 states: "The organization, functioning, and action of communal councils must meet the principles of co-responsibility, cooperation, solidarity, transparency [...], honesty, effectiveness, efficiency, social responsibility, social control, equity, justice, and gender and social equality." (art. 3, LCC)

A citizens' assembly (Asemblea de ciudadanos y ciudadanas), "the grand decision-making body of communal councils" (art. 6, LCC), must consist of at least 20% of inhabitants from the age of 15 and over (Consejos comunales, Expresión del poder popular). The communal council defines its jurisdiction, and its members are not paid (art. 12, LCC). Its various areas of intervention are defined as follows: "Health, education, land management in towns or rural areas, housing, social protection and social equality, popular economy, culture, security, communication and information, leisure and sports, food, technical guidance on water, technical guidance on energy and gas, services, and any other matter the community may decide useful to proceed with." (Art. 9, LCC)

President Hugo Chávez set up communal councils back in 2006, as a way of introducing participation in the drafting and implementing of local policies. The government sets great hope in these councils, which it sees as "territorial grassroots units of popular participation and self-government." As the president said, this "revolutionary explosion of popular power" must be the realistic and sustainable basis for a new type of state, for "a socialism of the 21st century." (...)

Talking about the 15,000 councils already extant in June 2007, Juan Leonel M. (FONDEMI, Microfinance Development Fund) does not hide the fact that relationships with municipalities are sensitive: "Actually the mayors, or at least many of them, are opposed to this new mode of election and way of organizing communities. They see the communal councils as organizations in competition with their own administrations. But the idea today is that the established power must move hand in hand with the constituent power of communal councils. The State is initiating a revolution within the State system. The people's constituent power must be the motor of change. Communal councils are the cornerstone of municipal self-government where the people have direct access to power." [5]

The 2006 law on communal councils is currently being changed. It is likely to be replaced shortly by a new law that is being drafted [6]

The PSUV Congress was held in several sessions from November 2009 to April 2010. The 772 delegates who took part in the Congress were elected in a secret ballot by rank-and-file party members (according to official figures, half of the 7,253,691 party members turned out for these internal elections). There were very few workers and company trade unionists among these delegates; on the other hand many delegates were employees who are answerable to the party or to local authorities and are therefore easily influenced. Even though Hugo Chávez, as president of the party, called on delegates to act in Congress as spokespersons for the popular base and social movements, with Congress composed as it was, it is hard to see how this could really lead to positive results.

In June 2009, the PSUV was the center of attention and debates, when thirty of the most eminent intellectuals invited by the Miranda International Center [7] discussed the progress of, and remaining obstacles to, the revolutionary process currently taking place.

The CIM published a summary [8] of these days for reflection entitled "Intellectuals, democracy and socialism: dead ends and paths to follow".

Here are some extracts from the summary which give an idea of what is at stake in the party itself and beyond, if a genuine revolutionary project is to be implemented.

"What is the future of a party whose base rarely gets the opportunity to have their say? (...) Is this

non-separation between State and party merely repeating a mistake of the 20th century socialist model? Was the PSUV created as a top-down structure out of a political necessity felt by the government, rather than a necessity felt by the base?

Another important aspect that came up several times was the need for collective leadership of the party, which is effectively based on grassroots social movements (and which does not merely use them as the government's communication channel during election periods), thereby putting an end to harmful, partisan vote-catching. This would create the base of a true revolutionary party which recognizes the right to express criticism and which fosters greater democracy within the party."

Among other issues debated: the nature of the new revolutionary State ("If the State was the instrument used by neo-liberalism to implement its own agenda, should it also be used to free us from neo-liberalism? Can this State put us on the path to socialism or, on the contrary, it is an obstacle to socialism?); the role of the media, both pro- and anti-Chávez; the characteristics of the revolution - it was said that it contained "many types of revolutions within it: student, farmer, worker, socialist, feminist, military and popular", thus the need for a constant dialogue between these groups; the definition of 21st century socialism; popular participation, especially through communal councils (see box above), which were described as "a prime example of participation" but "not [playing] a sufficiently participatory role" in practice because "they run the risk of being co-opted by the party".

The final issue considered during the meeting concerned the place and role of criticism in a revolutionary process, and the main question discussed was the following: "Is it possible for a revolution to succeed if it does not make criticism one of its main driving forces?" It was acknowledged that "criticism has lost some of its rightful place. In media that are sympathetic to the process, it is not difficult to find reactions reminiscent of 20th century socialism where those who openly criticize are accused of being "counter-revolutionaries" or "CIA agents". This considerably weakens the process as it prevents the government from implementing changes when things are not working." At the same time, the intellectuals said they "were pleased that the Executive had given them a space for criticism - something which had not happened in ten years. They also stressed the fact that this event proved that fear of criticism was unfounded. The claim made by the anti-Chávez opposition that there is a lack of freedom of expression in Venezuela is equally false."

The controversy raised by this meeting showed how relevant these questions are. These days were broadcast live in full on a public channel (TVES) and then re-broadcast over a period of some 10 days. Important sectors of the government strongly criticized the CIM initiative as well as the content of these meetings. Among the critics were the Minister for Oil, Rafael Ramirez, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nicolas Maduro, both of them important political figures in the PSUV. One of the pro-Chávez daily newspapers, VEA, published several articles condemning the CIM initiative and stating that, "they convene meetings amongst intellectuals whose positions are confused, whilst allowing them to let off steam at Chávez's leadership which they describe as a "hyper-leadership" or "progressive autocracy". Without a doubt, these are pro-Chavist supporters without Chávez, ashamed to show their true colors and get on the other side of the fence." (published 6 June 2009 under the collective signature Grano de maíz).

After ten days of controversy, both in the pro-Chávez and the opposition press, Hugo Chávez, in his televised programme *Aló Presidente* of June 14, seemed to agree with those who criticized the International Miranda Centre (CIM). That merely served to increase public interest in the event: different trade union worker leaders as well as the Communist Party of Venezuela and "Homeland for All" (two parties which support the government while refusing to join the PSUV) have defended the CIM and stated that the critical contribution of revolutionary intellectuals was a positive event. It was feared that at some point the CIM would be brought to heel or even shut down but nothing of

the sort has happened. This shows once again the complexity of the changes taking place in Venezuela, whose government cannot be considered as totalitarian.

Eric Toussaint

Next part: The Venezuelan economy: in transition towards socialism? (Part 3)

PART 1 is online on ESSF: [Series Bolivarian Venezuela at the crossroads \(Part 1\) - Nationalization, workers' control: achievements and limitations](#)

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] Officially, six million Venezuelans joined the PSUV at the time of the referendum on 2 December 2007. And yet the 'Yes' won only a little more than four million votes, some of which certainly did not come from PSUV activists since the PCV (Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Communist Party of Venezuela) and the PPT (Patria Para Todos, Homeland For All), among others, called for a 'Yes' vote. In fact, during the phase when the party was launched, ministries were given membership targets, which resulted in a flawed process and an artificial inflation of membership figures.

[2] Speech of Martha Harnecker on the occasion of the meeting "Intellectuals, democracy and socialism: dead ends and paths to follow" organized by the CIM
<http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=88031>

[3] Speech of Gonzalo Gómez on the occasion of the meeting "Intellectuals, democracy and socialism: dead ends and paths to follow" organized by the CIM
<http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n136570.html>

[4] <http://www.tecnoiuris.com/venezuela/gaceta-oficial/administrativo/ley-de-los-consejos-comunales.html>

[5] Quoted in « Les conseils communaux au Venezuela : un outil d'émancipation politique ? », by Anne-Florence Louzé, in Olivier Compagnon, Julien Rebotier and Sandrine Revet (eds), Le Venezuela au-delà du mythe. Chávez, la démocratie, le changement social, Editions de l'Atelier/Editions Ouvrières, Paris, 2009, 238 p.

[6] See the project of the new law: http://www.alcaldiagirardot.gob.ve/consejoscomunales/reforma_ley_consejos.pdf. To know more about this experiment, read Martha Harnecker's books on the subject. She lives in Venezuela and has devoted much time in the last few years to the experiment with communal councils. [[See Martha Harnecker "De los consejos comunales a las comunas" <http://www.rebellion.org/docs/83276.pdf>. This 61 page study includes a bibliography of Martha Harnecker's 21 books on the subject of popular participation. Read also, by the same author, "Las Comunas, sus problemas y cómo enfrentarlos" <http://www.rebellion.org/docs/90924.pdf>

[7] The Miranda International Center (CIM) is an official institution created by the Venezuelan presidency and financed by the Ministry of Higher Education.

[8] The complete summary (in French and Spanish) is online on the ESSF website in French: [Venezuela : première synthèse de la rencontre critique des intellectuels révolutionnaires](#)] and also on CADTM's in Spanish as well: www.cadtm.org/Primera-sintesis-del-encuentro