

Populism, social polarization and hybrid regimes: some analytical aspects of Venezuelan case.

Premise

In the last few years populism has become one of the key themes of social sciences, but the majority of the sociological world, with a few considerable exceptions like Paul Taggart, Taguieff and Jansen, still doesn't seem to dedicate sufficient attention to it. If we look at Italian and foreign political sociology manuals, this lack is even more evident. In many cases you will not find a specific dissertation on the subject at all, and if by chance it is referred to, it is hardly likely to be presented in all of its complexity and fecundity of arguments. It almost seems to be a theoretical subject unworthy of attention and study on the part of sociology. But as I will attempt to explain in this book, populist phenomena and their relative scientific questions provide important theoretical and empirical elements for a reflection on the sociology of democratic processes and on the evolution of political consensus in contemporary political systems.

From this point of view political science and political philosophy have forged ahead, especially in Italy. Studies by Margaret Canovan, Cas Mudde, Tarchi, Mastropasqua, Chiapponi and many other exponents that we will encounter in the course of this treatise have provided noteworthy contributions to the study of populist phenomena, often giving very interesting sociological input.

As has already been observed by various other sources (D'Eramo, 2013; Tarchi, 2015), books about populism have almost exponentially increased in the last few years. According to what may be gleaned from the Melvyl system of cataloguing of the University of California, in the early years of the twentieth century it was possible to count 11 publications on this subject, in the 50's 40, while in the 90's the number increases to 1336 and in the first decade of the new millennium the number

rises as high as 1801. This data clearly tells us that we are facing an all out populism renaissance, which is involving a community of thousands of scholars throughout the world with different approaches, leanings, and points of view

The main reason is the real increase of this kind of political phenomena. We have been witnessing a progressive expansion of populist political forces on a worldwide scale for at least thirty years, which have profoundly changed the operation of the political system where they have become insinuated. These populist phenomena include situations very different from one another: the 5 Star Movement, the Venezuelan revolutionary Bolivarianism of Chávez and the Bolivarian Cocalero Movement of Morales, the National Front of Le Pen, the Northern League and Forza Italia, just to name a few. Only a few years ago, many of these democracies seemed completely immune to these kinds of problems, but today they represent very significant case studies.

Along with an increase in terms of quantity, there has been an increase in terms of quality. A conspicuous sphere of the bibliography on populism is completely focused on its categorical definition. This diffusion has been characterized by a great variety of populist phenomena. To get an idea of all this, just consider the plethora of neologisms with the suffix of populism, such as web populism, neopopulism, or even media populism.

Many explanations are highly influenced by the prevalent theories of the historical period when they were formulated, but especially by the historical typology of populism being examined. Thus, formulating a general theory on populism is a challenge as fascinating as it is arduous. Certainly if we speak of a resumption of studies on populism, it is because in the last decades there has been a wide diffusion of the phenomenon on a planetary scale. A diffusion characterized by a great variety of populist phenomena. To have an idea, just consider the plethora of neologisms with the suffix – populism, such as web populism, neopopulism, and media populism.

The relationship between populism and democracy, or more precisely between populism and new forms of democratic risk, makes for an interesting research development. Some clamorous examples, like Venezuela, Ukraine, and Turkey, demonstrate that populism can have a debilitating effect on democratic structures, contributing to a process of hybridization which leads to a dimension of soft authoritarianism.

In this essay I will particularly linger on the case of Chavez's Venezuela as an emblematic example of a democracy transformed into a hybrid regime largely because of a widespread and institutionalized populist power.

What is a hybrid regime?

Hybrid regime is a new label for a problem which is in reality old for both political science and for political sociology. It is one of those definitions that were created to explain a form of regime which is no longer democratic but cannot be called completely authoritarian either. Different expressions were used in the past to define this kind of mixed forms of authoritarianism and democracy. Many authors, while keeping in mind Linz's lesson on the distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, have tried to indicate this kind of form of intermediary regime with various labels: democraduras, semi-democracies or pseudo democracies.

The great difference with respect to today is that up to the so-called third wave of the processes of democratization, these regimes concerned only a few countries which were, for the most part, at the margins of the so-called developed democracies, or however did not regard economically strong countries in their own area. After the end of the cold war and the end of the soviet bloc, we can observe a progressive increase of these cases in many parts of the ex Soviet Union and in countries similar to Venezuela, which in the sixties and seventies had represented stable democracies.

But, what are these hybrid regimes?

Leonardo Morlino defined them in this manner:

«Such a regime does not fulfill the minimalist requirements of a democracy, such as (a) universal suffrage, both male and female; (b) free, competitive, recurrent, and fair elections; (c) more than one party; and (d) different and alternative media sources. One important aspect of this definition is that in the absence of just one of these requirements, or if at some point one of them is no longer met, there is no longer a democratic regime but another political and institutional setup marked by varying degrees of uncertainty and ambiguity.» (L. Morlino, in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*).

It indicates a form of soft authoritarianism, which may be the result of a democracy which has lost some fundamental requirements to keep the definition of full democracy, or else a non democracy that still lacks at least one of the fundamental requirements be defined as such.

Social polarization and political polarization before Chávez and after Chávez

A fundamental study for understanding the advent of Chavism demonstrated how the social structure of the country had already changed profoundly in the twenty years prior to the year of 1999, year of the establishment of the first Chávez government. The two scholars, Ellner and Hellinger, pointed out how the social conditions of the Venezuelan population were dramatically worsening and were upsetting the social class structure between the last part of the eighties and the end of the nineties (Ellner S. & Hellinger D., 2004)

Ellner and Hellinger considered three orders of factors: the percentage of widespread poverty, the rising crime rate, and the modifications of the social classes.

The two researchers took into consideration the increase in housing for the poor in order to evaluate the country's growing poverty. As we can see from the diagram, in the twenty years preceding the first Chávez government the country had undergone a drastic process of impoverishment that had accelerated exponentially at the beginning of the nineties. What had once been one of the richest countries of Latin America in the sixties and seventies was generating a wide segment of citizens with a lifestyle well below average. This impoverishment affected a sector of the population which came to form a massive socially marginalized and politically excluded sector.

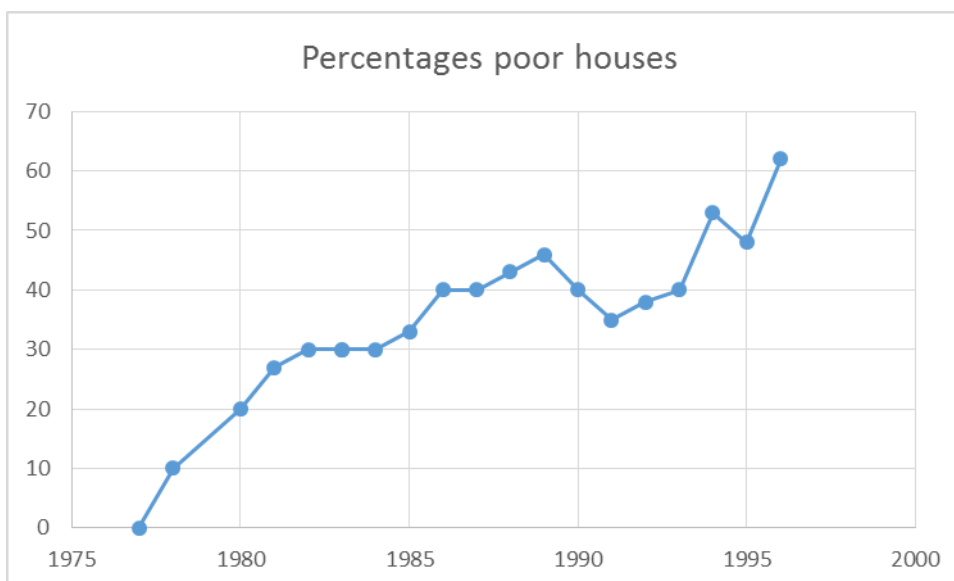


Fig. 1. Source: Consultores 21, Estudios de temas municipales, Caracas 1997.

If we consider an analogous study conducted by the Universidad Simón Bolívar of Caracas (fig.2) on poverty trends during the second half of the nineties up to the year 2014, an interesting evolution of the phenomenon emerges. The first years of the Chávez government see a decrease in poverty which remains stable for the duration of his life at around 8.000.000 poor people. Then almost immediately after his death poverty rates rise and double within the year. This diagram clearly shows how Venezuelan society is returning to the crisis levels of the pre Chávez era from the point of view of basic social conditions.

2003

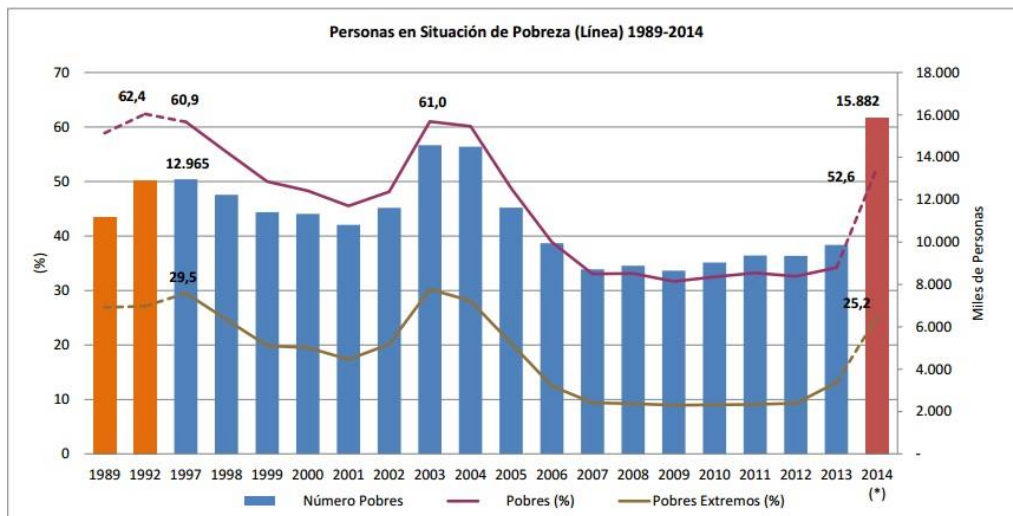
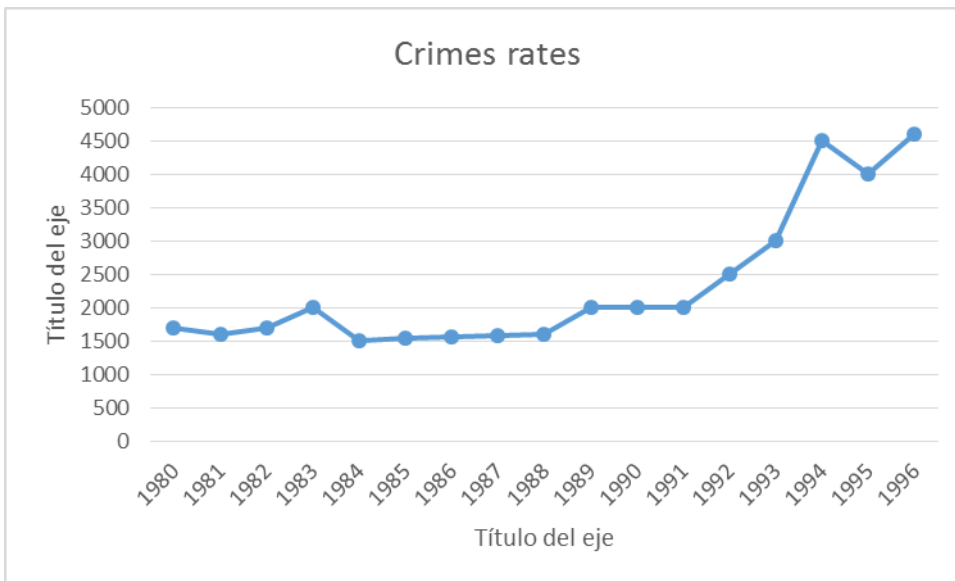


Fig. 2. Source: Universidad Simon Bolivar

Another factor highlighted in Ellner and Hellinger's study is related to the growth of the crime rate in the twenty year period before the arrival of Chávez.

According to another diagram presented by these scholars, violent crimes committed in those years quadrupled, going from about 1500 in the eighties and reaching about 4500 in 1996.

Fig. 3



Source: Consultores 21, Estudios de temas municipales, Caracas 1997.

We note in this case as well another aspect of the dramatic decline of Venezuelan society at the end of Punto Fijo's system. Nevertheless, if we look at the most recent data of the latest research on the same theme a situation just as dramatic comes to light.

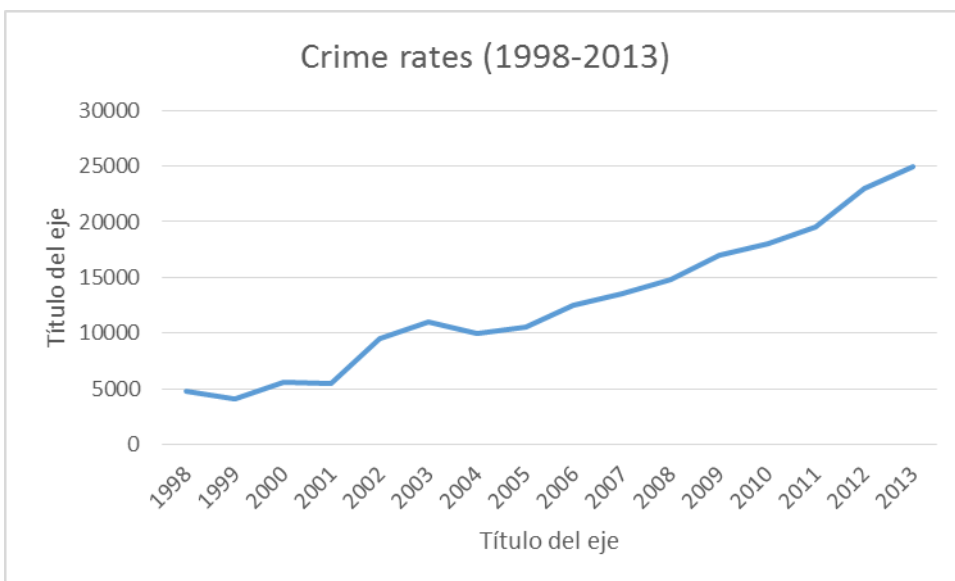


Fig. 4 Source: Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia

Statistical analysis by the Venezuela Observatory has shown in reality that the levels of homicide and violent crime actually rose instead in the final years of Chávez 's administration and the first year of Maduro's, reaching about 25000 deaths per year. This is a situation of enormous social danger, which places Venezuela among the most dangerous countries in the world and gives the measure of a context in which impunity and an objective difficulty on the part of the judiciary system to carry out its fundamental duties prevail.

In Ellner and Hellinger's line of thinking, social polarization is the final dimension to consider in order to grasp the profound transformation of Venezuelan society before Chávez. With this term we mean the shrinkage of the middle class and an intensification of the disparities between the upper class and the working class.

If you look at the graphs (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6), you will perceive how the advent of Chávez was preceded by a drastic process of social polarization.

Fig.5. Division of social classes in percentages in Venezuela in 1989.

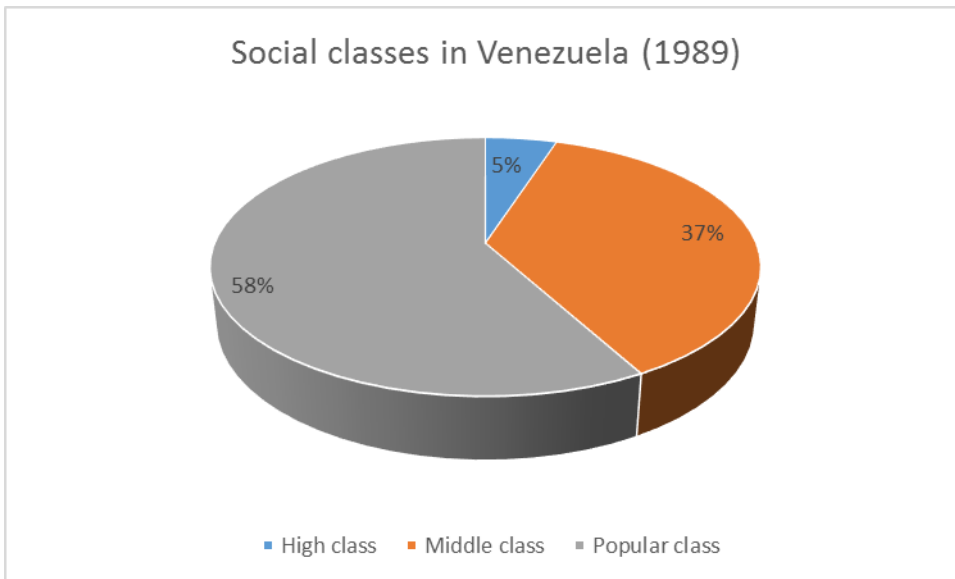
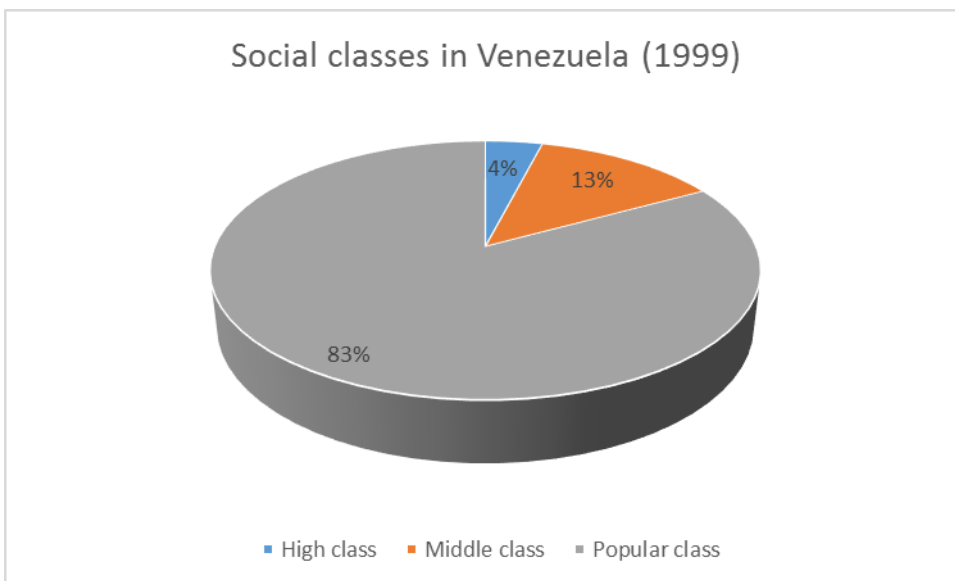


Fig. 6. Division of social classes in percentages 1999.



Source: Consultores 21, Estudios de temas municipales, Caracas 1999.

At the moment no works exist about social polarization during Maduro's period, however this data can be read if it is placed in relationship to the political evolution of Chavism and the current situation of the country's political blockage

To be clearer: the near disappearance of the middle class and the social exacerbation between a massive working class and a tiny upper class allowed the advent of a populist movement like

Chávez's. Indeed, it is recognized that the Bolivarian movement (Anselmi M., 2013), like many populist movements of the South American left turn, allowed the political inclusion of the more disadvantaged social sectors, which had been excluded from the electoral process in the preceding system. Chávez had effectively brought the poor to the polls and they obviously voted for him.

Social polarization has been to all intents and purposes one of the fundamental social conditions for the advent of a populist power like the Chavist movement. The interesting thing in this context is the evolution of social polarization within political polarization during the arc of Bolivarian power, first with Chávez and later with Maduro., Chavist political discourse (Reyes A., 2013) was built upon and nourished by underlining the social polarization between a poor majority which he represented politically, acting as their voice, and an elite wealthy minority representing the rich.

The outcomes of the numerous administrative and public elections from 1999 to 2013 demonstrate that Chavism achieved dominance, transforming social polarization into political polarization. Two electoral and political blocks of almost equal strength were created under Chávez and he was able to guarantee a majority only thanks to his charismatic leadership. The national election of April 2013 which decided Maduro's presidency was emblematic. The socialist government, left an orphan by the loss of Chávez, won by only 50,66% against 49,7 % which went to the opposition coalition of Capriles. This result illustrates the great dependency of the public consensus apparatus on the leader figure. For all that he was designated by Chávez himself as his best successor, Maduro does not find the same level of support. One might say that, from a structural point of view, the social polarization which characterized Venezuela before the appearance of Chávez, after his death and with the rise of Maduro has remained constant but a phenomenon of political polarization has been added which is a critical factor and a block to the political system. If, on the one hand Chavism deserves the merit for promoting social and political inclusion, on the other hand it has created a political system which is greatly dependent on the cult of personality of its founder. This dependency has caused a problem of blocked democracy upon the leader's death.

The lack of this charismatic element is one of the major critical points of Maduro's government and even represents a new phase for the political life of the country, marked by the completion of political polarization. Half of the country is aligned with the government and half is aligned against it. Chávez's charismatic figure was able to overcome this stalemate on the level of representative balance and maintain the country's governability, but today we have a deadlock situation blocking the government's activity and inducing the opposition into constant protests in the attempt to delegitimize Maduro.

Evolution of populism and rule of law.

The complete transformation of social polarization into political polarization is one of the structural elements and thus a critical factor of the orphan Bolivarian populism. When I use the expression “orphan populism” I mean a populist system where the figure of the charismatic and founding leader has ceased to exist. This kind of transformation concerns the profound relationship between a populist power and the social dimension, between populist power and the consensus base.

Another important aspect of the evolution of the Venezuelan political system is also the relationship between political power and the country’s institutional dimension. An evaluation of the passage from Chávez to Maduro and of the current Venezuelan political system cannot disregard the implications of the populist methods on democratic operation and on the *Rule of law* (Maravall J.M. & Przeworski A., 2003).

Bolivarian populism has profoundly changed the institutional machinery of the Venezuelan system of government. The alteration of democratic operation and of the state of law on the part of Bolivarian leadership from the first Chávez government to the current Maduro government has increased to the point that some analysts speak of a regime that is not fully democratic, but rather is a case of soft authoritarianism. That is to say, a political system with many serious issues within its democratic structure.

Venezuela has altered its normal condition of *Rule of law* to the point of being defined a hybrid regime—, and as Levitsky and Way explain, hybrid regimes combine “democratic rules with authoritarian governance” (Levitsky S. and Way L., 51).

With the passage to Maduro’s government we have a political power that first experienced a strong populist distortion and direct conditioning on the part of a charismatic leader and then, in this deformed and populist centralized system, the centralizing power was suddenly substituted by a weak, contested, and externally controlled leadership. The theme of the alteration of the Rule of Law in Venezuela is thus the theme of its political hybridization. It is a good idea to discuss some analytical elements to get an idea of this issue: the centrifugal nature of the new power, the spread of penal populism and the resistance to change.

The first point is the condition of centrifugal forces which Chavism fell into as a movement and as a de facto power after Chávez’s death. This expression was used opportunely by Corrales (Corrales,

2013), who underlined that after Chávez's death not only was the capacity of the Chavist movement diminished to produce consensus in society, but there was also a diminishment of control within the movement and within the highest spheres of government to follow the same line. Rather, an adversarial aspect was launched in which different factions of Chavism each follow a different line and go in different directions and propose separate strategies from one another, although about general choices as electoral strategies, economic policy and foreign policy they agree. This kind of balkanization of Chavist power began immediately after the presidential elections of 2013 and still continues today. All you have to do in Venezuela is turn on the television to note that Chavism no longer has one person at the helm, but many figures that often have different opinions and often express divergent and even contrasting lines in different regions and in different sectors of the state. According to Corrales, the centripetal nature of the opposition contrasts with this centrifugal attitude. In my opinion this is not entirely exact. The ever more centrifugal configuration of the new Chavist power actually creates expectations of immediate change in the opposition that then finds expression in street protests; but, as the facts demonstrate, still not under a united and organized leadership. Hence, the government's external control is seen as a pretext to initiate a public action to delegitimize the government. This short circuit is actually very dangerous because it constitutes a radicalization factor of the political conflict. On the one side, expectations of overturning the force of legitimate power are generated in the opposition camp; while on the other side, the ferment created by the protests induces a repressive behavior ever more justified by the logic of exceptional circumstances.

Another fundamental element of political hybridization is the spread of penal populism, With Chávez, Venezuela became one of the most evident cases of Penal Populism on a global level. As John Pratt defined it, *Penal Populism* is the conditioning of a country's judicial system on the part of a political power (Pratt, 2006). In Venezuela's case, the centralized Chavist populist power intervened on several occasions or pressured the judicial system, undermining its independence. The penal code reform of 2005, for example, is an evident demonstration of this. In this reform measures against disrespectful acts towards the government were reinforced and the use of public spaces for protests was greatly limited. Even more significant is the fact that the high positions of the Supreme Court of justice have always been assigned to men near the Chávez movement. All of this gives the measure of a Rule of Law which has been highly conditioned by political power.

After having presented these first two critical elements it would almost seem obvious to reach the conclusion that the period of Maduro's government represents a critical phase and hence of short duration. After a reflection on the passage from Chávez to Maduro, it is natural to wonder how long this kind of situation can last. Contrary to what you might think, the problem of

calculating the duration of the Chavist system is much more complex and in many respects seems to resolve itself in a scenario which is far from negative for the Bolivarians.

The fact that the government stays in place despite the reduction of consensus and growing protests indicates that the interpretation of its duration may be tied to its entrenchment in the territory according to a strategy of territorial control by Colectivos and other forms of political organization activist. Two factors explain the resilience of Maduro's government to all these critical factors, which include the economic crisis, growing violence, and social decline.

First of all, the near proximity of political power to the military apparatus. The praetorian element confers strength and resilience that other forms of political power don't have. In order to have it, other governments would have to make recourse to paramilitary or guerrilla formations. Military support confers the Bolivarian power with a special anchor to the territory and permits a system of control of the state bureaucracy both in terms of governance conditioning and in terms of clientele, since soldiers have often been used by the government for extra-military assignments such as social missions.

A second element is the theme of the durability of a revolutionary political system. Although it came to power with democratic elections, and even though the revolutionarism of the Chavist movement has always been more rhetorical than real, it is not possible to neglect this important feature of its political style. It is in fact true, that differently from Cuba, for example, Venezuela has expressed its own revolutionary objective in a constituent form, radically modifying the system of the Venezuelan state according to the objectives of Chávez's populist power. If this has avoided the use of force or the recourse to violence, it has, however, obtained similar results on the level of state and social changes, however much in minor form.

Two political scientists, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, analyzed the problem of the durability of revolutionary regimes, taking into consideration the political regimes of the last few centuries. As they underlined, without a doubt, revolutionary regimes characteristically last longer than other political regimes. According to these two scholars, the reasons for this peculiarity depend on four orders of factors:

- 1) the destruction of Independent Power Centers
- 2) Strong ruling party;
- 3) Invulnerability to Coups;
- 4) Enhanced coercive Capacity.

Each of these factors can be adapted to the Venezuelan case.

First of all, the destruction of independent forms of power is clear in the long process of reconverting every form of institutional power in a Chavist key. On the juridical level, the Bolivarian constitutional reform was the first act that set this dynamic in motion. The numerous actions of Bolivarian welfare, such as the social missions, have de facto taken the place of the social presence of the state. Meanwhile, from an administrative and bureaucratic point of view, the socialist party is notorious for facilitating the appointment to state jobs to those close to them.

The strength of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela is demonstrated by the last two years of Maduro's government. In spite of the centrifugal forces and the differences among the internal factions, his government still remains firmly in place. The role of the military and militant organizations, such as the *Colectivos*, which often have an almost military presence in the area, help to keep this party's position strong, stronger in fact than any other party of a western liberal democracy.

As for invulnerability against coups d'état, the case of the coup of the 11th of April 2002, attempted by some sectors of the opposition and failed because of Chávez's return after three days, is emblematic. From that moment on, anti-coup measures on the part of Chavist governments have enormously intensified, and they also receive strategic and analytical support from Cuba and other allied countries.

Examining enhanced coercive capacity, the Chavist system has established itself throughout all the country, following a model of dominance advocated by Gramsci; and has developed a very strong conditioning strategy, beginning with the media and reaching significant presence in the institutions.

Conclusions

In this article, I wanted to examine some structural aspects of the passage of the Bolivarian political system with Chávez to the post Chávez one governed by Maduro. I have particularly dwelt on two aspects: social dynamics (the evolution of social polarization and political polarization)) and the transformation of the Rule of Law.

We may therefore conclude that when Chávez came to power, Venezuela was socially polarized, and this very polarization helped form and consolidate the Chavist populist power. This social polarization remains with Maduro, but now it is the basis of a political polarization that is expressed in parliamentary representation and in the ideological polarization of Venezuelan public opinion.

If we instead consider the impact of the country's institutional system, it is interesting to reflect upon the alteration of the Rule of Law and the progressive political hybridization of the country to the point of it having been defined a Hybrid Regime.

The critical scenario could make us think of a system on the brink of crisis, and yet another less evident aspect must be taken into consideration: the durability of a revolutionary government, though non violent. Its territorial entrenchment, the organizational capacities of Chavism and its hegemonic dimension make up a strong element of resistance to the critical situation, making the entire situation more complex.

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