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## Op-Ed

### Chávez Between Romanticism and Pragmatism

*Miguel Ángel Santos*

In February 2002 the price of Venezuelan oil barely reached US\$16 per barrel, after having reached US\$20 during the previous two years. On the 18th day of that month, President Hugo Chávez announced an unlikely policy package that comprised a 40% devaluation of the bolivar, an increase of the Value Added Tax, the implementation of a bank debit tax, and a reduction in public expenditure. The International Monetary Fund could have not done it any better. This event brought on what would later become a key feature of the *chavista* process: while deep in romantic, leftist orientations, Chávez does not hesitate to resort to utter pragmatism when circumstances warrant. Thus, notwithstanding Chávez' anti-imperialist rhetoric, the United States still accounts for more than half of Venezuela's international trade. Alongside a resurgence of the old endogenous growth model, Venezuela has reached record level of imports. Last year, luxury vehicles imports doubled in the midst of a galloping oil bonanza and the fast wealth creation of some private entrepreneurs. Some revolutionary leaders ride across Caracas in Audis, Hummers and BMWs.

Some, but not all of them. Within the administration there are romantics who are promoting a "new socialism" (or XXI-century Venezuelan socialism) and believe that the true path to this new socialism involves re-discovering the "new man", an idea loosely tied to the old marxist concept of a man not motivated by economic goals and individual progress, but by social wealth fare and solidarity. Juan Carlos Monedero, a professor from Madrid's Universidad Complutense who was brought to Venezuela for ideological support has explained that the new man is revealed by putting the old man in the face of new circumstances. However, those "new circumstances" are far from clear and Monedero, in a presentation to the Venezuelan-American Chamber of Commerce in late April, presented three power-point slides with 52 bullets indicating what the XXI-century Venezuelan socialism is not. It is neither communism nor capitalism. It is neither the "old socialism" nor statism, yet no one seems to be clear about what it *is*.

Some clues were given after the elections held on December 3 of last year, which renewed Chávez' presidential mandate until 2012. Encouraged by the electoral results (63% voted for Chávez), some of the romantics managed to convince the President of an economic policy change. It was time to put the money where the words were. Thus, ten days after the elections, a decree was issued suspending access to official-exchange rate dollars for more than 3,500 products. The government ceased to intervene in the parallel exchange market (the reference for goods excluded from the official exchange rate system). The foreign-exchange control administration agency cut the supply of dollars by 50%.

The idea was to cut back imports and foster domestic production and employment through an entrepreneurial scheme based on collective and community ownership. Chávez announced those initiatives in a televised address held in the first week of January, where he also launched the nationalization of the largest telecommunications company (CANTV) and the entire network of electric power companies to convert them into "social business" not necessarily oriented to profitability.

The results did not take long to emerge. In January, the annualized inflationary index hit 20%, and the price of food products increased by 32%. Price controls, the avoidance of which is now a criminal offence (Zimbabwe style), resulted in product shortages in the order of 26%. The exchange rate in the parallel market depreciated by 20% in fifteen days.

Was this too much romanticism? Chávez appointed Vice President Jorge Rodríguez, former Dean of the National Electoral Council, to head a nationwide restock operation. Rodríguez managed to alleviate the crisis through massive imports. The 3,500 item listing of products with authorized access to official exchange rate was revised, and the flow of foreign exchange at the official rate re-established—and even increased—in order to finance a larger volume of imports. The government also intervened in the parallel exchange market, with fairly moderate results. Some essential food items such as chicken, milk, cheese, coffee and sugar remain in short supply both at grocery stores and MERCAL (the food distribution network run by the state).

The fact that pragmatism has prevailed once again is far from signifying that Venezuela is moving in the right direction. The government continues to increase public expenditure well above the growth in oil income, which has resulted in seven fiscal deficits over the eight years that Chávez has been in office. Paralyzed by the virulent anti-entrepreneurial discourse and legal uncertainty, private investment remains at minimum levels. After eight years of oil-fuelled public expenditure, the Venezuelan industrial apparatus is already working at full capacity, placing the government with an uncomfortable choice between higher inflation or more imports. The policy effectiveness of increasing consumption through higher imports has its limits. On one hand the sale of foreign exchange at the official rate is approaching the volume of oil exports. On the other, cheap imports help to fight inflation yet they have a devastating effect on employment.

In the last two years, more than two million people have become entirely dependant on the government. The shortage of fresh investments and jobs in the private sector is placing the subsistence of a large number of Venezuelans on the state's shoulders. The figure of the great benefactor is taking hold gradually. But the oil income is not sufficient to give jobs to all those Venezuelans willing to work.

In the meantime, Chávez is pursuing an ambitious political reform that will allow him to dominate every channel, institution and mechanism through which social dissatisfaction could find a political avenue. He is attempting to advance three converging processes: Constitutional Reform, Enabling Act and United Party, with the purpose of reinforcing his personal power. The

Constitutional Reform pursues three primary goals: 1) eliminate any trace of counterweight to the Executive Branch in general and the Presidency in particular; 2) re-centralize the State entirely (including some type of stipulation allowing expedited removal of elected governors); and 3) establish the President's indefinite re-election. The Enabling Act empowers the President to rule by decree for 18 months, legislating in every domain of the country's life. The United Party will serve as the civil instrument through which Chávez intends to hold sway over his followers, removing all shades among them and ensuring their unconditional obedience.

Venezuela's future will be determined by three factors taking place on different levels. First, by who wins the race between the concentration of political power by Chávez and the decline of the economy. Second, by who prevails in the acerbic battle between the romantic and the pragmatic wings of the *chavismo*. And last, by the evolution of oil prices in international markets. On this last front, everything seems to indicate that there is still some room to manoeuvre. ■

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## Constitutional Assembly and Turmoil in Ecuador

*Andrés Mejía Acosta*

The overwhelming victory of the Ecuadorean government's proposal to set up a "Constituent Assembly" in a national referendum held on April 15 represents a dramatic shift in the power struggle between the President and the opposition. When President Rafael Correa was inaugurated in January of this year, the prospects for escalated political conflict with the legislature were quite high. Correa had no party representation in congress, the congressional majority led by his electoral arch-rival Alvaro Noboa had appointed key control and oversight officials, and a conflict of interest with Former President Lucio Gutiérrez diluted any prospects for political cooperation with his Patriotic Society Party (PSP). In this context of political solitude, Correa turned to the Constituent Assembly as a political lifeboat that would breathe popular legitimacy and allow his government to navigate Ecuador's troubled waters.

For many, the Assembly referendum has been Correa's "third electoral round", and it soon became evident that the President could not afford to lose this gamble as he threatened to resign if he lost the vote. In his quest for legitimacy, his administration spared no means against all those who opposed the Constituent Assembly, whether they questioned it on procedural or substantive grounds. Those who questioned the Assembly on substantive grounds, including congressional parties seeking to maintain their political privileges, expressed concerns about the lack of a reform agenda, the government's vagueness about the Assembly's powers and prerogatives, time frame, and whether reform proposals could be dealt with through congressional reforms instead. When the Electoral Tribunal (TSE) approved a presidential initiative to hold a National Referendum on April 15, the opposition majority in congress opposed the decision and threatened to dismiss the TSE's president. On March 7, president Correa escalated the institutional conflict by encouraging the TSE to dismiss 57 of 100 legislators on the grounds that they were opposing the electoral process, and replacing them with their alternates. A week later, the Constitutional Tribunal rejected an appeal presented by the deposed legislators, thus effectively neutralizing the negative influence of congress in the referendum process.

Other non-partisan actors, including the Ecuadorian Association of Newspapers (AEDEP), as well as newspaper editorialists, questioned the President's disregard for democratic procedures in the process of organizing the Assembly. On March 9, the AEDEP issued a public statement criticizing the lack of freedom of press, the unconstitutional dismissal of opposition legislators, and the defying attitude of President Correa of the rule of law in Ecuador. The government's response denied any legitimacy to AEDEP's claims and initially even threatened to sue and close newspapers. In a quick populist move that echoed strategies used by former president Abdalá Bucaram ten years ago, president Correa bundled voices of dissent in the same group, accusing them of representing traditional interests and opposing the will of the people. The fragmented and disconcerted political opposition fell for the "us vs. them" strategy, and organized an anti-Assembly campaign based on fear ("change is chaos") and cold war symbolism

(warning against "Correa's communist project"). According to the TSE's final vote count on April 20, only 12% of voters opposed the Assembly and less than 6% voted null or blank compared with the usual 20%.

In the aftermath of the referendum, the organized political opposition came out clearly diminished but the long-term success of the government's project, including the re-writing of a constitution, is far from certain. The congressional opposition organized through traditional parties (the Social Christian Party (PSC), the Democratic Left (ID), and the Christian Democratic Union (UDC)) and other populist options (the PSP and the Institutional Renewal Party of National Action (PRIAN)), has lost credibility and legitimacy. Having dismissed the brokering influence of elected parties, the President has initiated a plebiscitarian form of government which could not be sustained in the long run. Correa's "connection" with the people depends on generous government expenditure, whether in the form of cash transfers for the poor, "microcredit loans", or "emergency relief" for provinces. Such transfers together with the decision to lower Value Added Tax rates create mounting pressure on fiscal balances, especially in the dollarized context. Secondly, although Correa currently enjoys high popularity ratings of over 70%, he lacks the solid or organized political support that opposition groups have. The two largest cities, Quito and Guayaquil, are governed by influential leaders associated to ID and PSC party structures respectively, and smaller cities in the interior remain under the political influence of important brokers for the PSP and PRIAN parties. Unless the government can effectively dismantle those partisan structures in time for the Assembly elections, the electoral result could represent a significant reversal for president Correa in six months time.

Many have been tempted to compare Correa's plebiscitarian style of government, his disregard for democratic institutions, and his hopes for a one-fix-all solution to the governance problem in the re-writing of the constitution to Venezuelan President Chávez and President Morales in Bolivia. Like his neighbours, Correa has effectively capitalized on the poor performance and prestige of "traditional" political parties for his political success. The April 15 referendum results delivered a further blow to the credibility of political parties. Unlike Presidents

Chávez and Morales however, Correa lacks the organized support and loyalty of the military or indigenous/peasant organizations, which have played a decisive role in previous presidential crises in Ecuador. It would take more than charisma and generous spending to navigate the country's troubled waters. ■

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## COLOMBIA-US

On May 2 Colombian President Álvaro Uribe met with US President George W. Bush in Washington to discuss a bilateral free trade agreement. On May 1, Uribe appeared before Congress to ask to fast track a free trade agreement with the US. The urgency of his request is hastened by the June expiration of the President's 'fast track' authority whereby Congress has to approve or reject free trade agreements negotiated by the White House without making any amendments. The US is Colombia's main trading partner and the current free trade agreement, the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act, is due to expire at the end of the year.

This is Uribe's 10<sup>th</sup> visit to Washington since he was elected in 2002, but his first to a Democrat-controlled Congress hostile to his FTA proposal. In addition to facing obstacles linked to the Democrats' wish to include labour protections in the text of all new trade agreements, Uribe's record on human rights and his alleged involvement with paramilitary groups have further slowed the FTA approval process.

As a result of allegations of involvement with paramilitaries the US Senate panel that oversees trade with Colombia froze some US\$55.2 million in military aid on April 16. However, President Uribe has worked to ease those concerns by meeting with dozens of high-ranking Democrats and other officials during his three days in Washington. Uribe also held a press conference in Miami where he vehemently defended his government's efforts to control paramilitary groups.

In Colombia's domestic arena, debate is taking place between political parties on ways to deal with paramilitary groups. The Liberal Party headed by newly re-elected César Gaviria is promoting a referendum on whether to conduct a humanitarian exchange with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—relatives of 12 Assembly Deputies were kidnapped in 2002. If supported by other parties, the referendum question would be included on the October 28 ballot for regional elections. The success of this initiative depends both on the support of President Uribe, who has favoured a military solution, as well as on the outcome of his attempt to secure an FTA with the US.

 In the last issue of FOCAL POINT, Alberto Pfeifer presented a Brazilian view on the Mexico-Brazil relationship in "Brazil and Mexico Edging Towards a Strategic Relationship?" This month Federico Vázquez offers a view from Mexico.

## Mexico-Brazil: Myths and Reality, Toward a New Vision on Cooperation

*Federico Vázquez*

The traditional view of the historical rivalry between Mexico and Brazil assumes that both nations have tried to be the regional leader at different points in time. The truth is that this idea is largely a myth and in reality neither country has the sufficient structural conditions to establish regional hegemony. One can also offer an alternative interpretation: the rivalry lies in their opposing views on international integration and different strategies for linking development and globalization, plus the role of the government in such a process. While Mexico opted for liberal integration and views globalization as an internal development strategy, Brazil opted for competitive integration to avoid the total dismantling of its protectionist structures and to allow it to strengthen its domestic market and government apparatus. Mexico is among the countries with the most free trade agreements. In contrast, Brazil's geopolitical strategy focuses on sub-regionalism and south-south cooperation.

In spite of President Felipe Calderón's government's current rhetoric about Mexico regaining Latin American leadership, what is really emerging is a desire to counterbalance the United States' excessive influence in the region. The so-called will to pick up diplomatic activism in the region faces some stumbling blocks: Mexican exports to the rest of Latin America represent approximately 3% of the total, whereas 87% goes to the United States. Meanwhile, American security plans introduce a new division with the south of the hemisphere. Moreover, a perception prevails among most South American elites that Mexico is integrating with the rest of North America, which undermines the argument that Mexico serves as a bridge between North and South.

Some time ago, Brazil identified South America as its zone of influence and strategic focus for its foreign policy. This provides the context for Brazil's activity in MERCOSUR and its actions in favour of a south-south relationship that aims to unite the Southern Cone with Asia and Africa. Brazil's southern interest also explains the South American Community of Nations initiative and its frontal opposition to the Free Trade Area of the Americas. All of this has meant leaving Mexico aside except for viewing the Mexican economy as a bridge into the American market.

While it is true that Mexico does not have the diplomatic standing to take regional leadership, Brazil does not have the necessary conditions either. Internal disagreements within MERCOSUR, the inability to move forward on its institutional framework, conflicts with Bolivia because of the so-called "geo-economy of gas", the sub-regional confrontation with Venezuela regarding Bolivarian integration initiatives and Venezuela's oil diplomacy stand in the way of regional leadership.

To appreciate Brazil's hegemonic intentions it is important to understand that it has more to do with its national interests and its ability to translate them into mechanisms or concrete foreign policy instruments that can put it on the map as a global player. The Mexican vision is weak in this regard and the ambiguity of its government's objectives explains the constant improvisation.

It would be better to approach the bilateral relationship in terms of misunderstandings: the two countries are culturally distant and are in many ways unknown to each other. There is a certain lack of interest among the elite to create shared visions or build institutional opportunities for dialogue and political cooperation in multilateral groups. This in turn prevents them from identifying common areas of interest, which could lead to concrete initiatives in areas such as global governance, human rights, social development and environmental risks, commercial justice, democratic institutional and international organization reform, and the global financial system. These are areas where multilateral cooperation could be fruitful.

The failure to arrive at a consensus on the reform of the United Nations, particularly with respect to the Security Council, is a consequence of the two countries' distinct strategies for international integration and development models. Starting in the 1980s, Brazil defined its governmental foreign policy objectives while Mexico reduced its foreign policy to commercial and economical affairs. One of the most visible effects of this was the failed attempt to elect a Mexican Secretary General at the Organization of American States, which at the same time led to an unnecessary confrontation with a strategic ally like Chile.

In the following months, close attention should be paid to the activities of both departments of Foreign Affairs regarding President Luis Inácio Lula Da Silva's visit to Mexico planned for August. The present circumstances call for a political rapprochement that would be very beneficial to both countries. However, the existing tensions related to their differing visions for global integration caution against believing in any real possibility of advancing towards a new era of bilateral cooperation.

Despite the obstacles, it would be good for Mexico to understand the importance of its relationship with Brazil as a way to restore a geopolitical balance with its northern neighbour and rekindle the diplomatic activism that it has worked to build during many years. Brazil would be prudent to understand the strategic relevance of cooperating with Mexico in the multilateral field and in global matters. Its projection as a global player and its South-South relationships could serve as a negotiation strategy with the North. Finally, the "Chávez" phenomenon is a convergence factor in the defence of both nations' interests in their spheres of influence.

At the present moment the Brazilian way seems to be more promising. It is still too early to know clearly what the Mexican foreign policy towards Latin America will be, but the link with Brazil will be significant. Building a new bilateral agenda cannot be based solely on the commercial and economic interests of big enterprises and requires advancing towards joint initiatives on global issues. This is where the opportunity for a new rapprochement lies. Both countries have the political responsibility to avoid losses in the region's influence. In other words, the rift in Latin America is contrary to the interests of both governments since it weakens the region as an international actor and both nations as players in world politics. ■

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## The Paradox of the Cuban American Identity

*Guillermo Grenier*

As historic changes take place in Cuba, researchers from the Florida International University (FIU) Institute for Public Opinion Research and Cuban Research Institute have developed and conducted the eighth FIU Cuba Poll, a detailed survey designed to measure the political attitudes of the Cuban American community in South Florida.

While a respectable social-science literature exists on Cubans in the United States, most of the attention has been placed on the socio-economic adjustment of the community and its successes. Very little research has been devoted to analyzing the political culture of Cuban Americans, an irony given that political forces are at the very origin of the contemporary Cuban-American presence in the US. This knowledge gap has been filled by a media generated image of a Cuban American community characterized by staunch anti-Castroism, militancy, terrorism, political conservatism, and a predominant affiliation with the US Republican Party.

The FIU poll attempts to look at the range of attitudes and behaviours of the Cuban American community beyond stereotypes and explores the political views of the Cuban American community on the issue that most clearly defines its identity: its relationship with the island. The 1,000 randomly selected Cuban-American respondents were polled in Miami-Dade County. Interviews were completed on March 26, 2007. The margin of error for the overall poll is plus or minus 3.2%. Overall results are weighted to be representative of the Cuban-American community of Miami-Dade County as a whole.

While the political affiliations reported by the respondents seem to corroborate the typical image of the Cuban American community (of those registered to vote, 66.1% are registered with the

### CUBA

On April 18 Luis Posada Carriles, an anti-Castro Cuban militant was released from a US prison after his attorneys posted a \$250,000 bail. Posada was indicted on charges of lying to immigration authorities while trying to become a naturalized US citizen in April 2005.

Posada, 79, is a Cuban-born former CIA operative and naturalized citizen of Venezuela. He is wanted in Cuba and Venezuela for masterminding a Cubana jetliner bombing that killed 73 people in 1976—charges that Posada denies. Posada escaped from prison in Venezuela where he was detained following his arrest in connection with the bombing. Since then, Posada engaged in other violent activities against the Cuban government including the organization of sabotages in Havana hotels in 1997—to which he confessed, and a plot to kill Fidel Castro while the Cuban leader was participating in the 10<sup>th</sup> Ibero-American Summit in Panama. An accusation made by Castro led to Posada's trial and sentence by a Panamanian court. But in *August 2004*, before leaving power, *then* Panama President Mireya Moscoso pardoned Posada, a gesture that provoked the rupture of diplomatic relations between Cuba and Panama. It was after the annulment of his sentence when Posada secretly flew from Panama to the US through Mexico.

The Posada case has put the administration of George W. Bush in a difficult spot. Cuba and Venezuela have repeatedly accused the US government of protecting Posada by holding him on an immigration violation, a charge far less serious than those he faces in their countries, and denounced the US for exercising a double standard, urging nations to fight terrorists but going easy on an anti-Castro activist at home. On April 26, Venezuela's ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS) charged that the US State Department has ignored Venezuela's extradition request. The day before, Venezuela and Cuba asked a UN counter-terrorism committee to investigate Posada's release on bail on grounds that the international terrorist's release constitutes a clear violation of the Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism.

On May Day, Cuba's state-run newspaper *Granma* ran an article signed by Fidel Castro calling upon all Cubans marching in Havana's Revolution Square and in other cities throughout the island to protest the release of the "terrorist monster". Meanwhile, Posada must wear an electronic monitoring device while under house arrest at his wife's home in Miami pending his May 11 trial on immigration fraud charges. He still faces the prospect of being held by immigration authorities.

Republican Party though the number of Republican registrants continues to drop, 8.3% are registered Democrats and 15.2% are registered as Independents), the poll also showed that a diversity of opinions exists on the current regime in Cuba and on how to bring about change on the island. This should not be surprising given that the Cuban American community has developed over a time span of 47 years and over distinct waves of migration with different pull and push factors. Cubans have left the island at different times for different reasons and have been received in South Florida under a host of social, economic, political and cultural conditions. Understandably, those who lost everything in the revolutionary turmoil of 1959 and its aftermath may not feel the same about the island as those who left in 1980, 1990 or 2000. Moreover, a growing number of members in the Cuban American community in South Florida were not born in Cuba, a phenomenon sometimes described as the rising tide of the Cuban community.

The big picture that emerges is of a community that expects changes to take place on the island within the next few years and is willing to help promote change by challenging some of the existing policies of the US government towards the island. However, while Cuban Americans are generally concerned about the need for change on the island, they are far from monolithic in their support for different policies affecting US-Cuba relations.

In spite of the recent events on the island, the Cuban American community is guarded in its expectation that major political change will occur in the near future. Approximately 17% of respondents feel that changes will occur within one year. An additional 46% anticipate that major changes are more than one year but less than five years away. Pessimism has declined since the 2004 poll, with 13.4% of respondents stating that change would never come to the island, a decrease of 3%.

With regards to US-Cuba relations, approximately 65% of respondents said that they would support a dialogue with the Cuban government. This year's mark is the highest in the history of the poll, up from 55.6% in 2004 and from 40% in the 1991 poll. 57.2% of respondents would even support establishing diplomatic relations with the island. Meanwhile, over 97% of respondents support lending a hand to human rights groups working inside Cuba, which echoes the results of the previous surveys.

In the economic realm, although only 23.6% feel that the embargo has worked well, 57.5% of the Cuban American population support its continuation. Support for the embargo has declined from 66% in the 2004 poll and represents the lowest level of support in the history of the poll. Approximately 29% of respondents would like to end the embargo immediately without any condition. Another 8% would end the embargo upon the death of Fidel Castro while 11% would wait until both Fidel and Raúl were gone. Approximately 5.7% would wait for the island's economic system to change (without any changes to the political system) while 10% would wait for democratic changes (without economic changes). The bulk of the respondents, 36.6%, would rather wait for both economic and political changes on the island before lifting the embargo.

On specific restrictions imposed by the embargo, the respondents' opinions appear to be somewhat more moderate than might be anticipated in light of the numbers voicing overall support for the embargo. Approximately 71.7% support the sale of medicine to the people on the island. 62% would favour selling food to Cuba and about 34% support the expansion of existing agricultural relations with the island. Similarly, 55.2% would support allowing unrestricted travel to Cuba. In fact, approximately 64% of the respondents would like to return to the 2003 policies governing travel and remittances. 26% of the respondents feel that the restrictions put in place after 2003 have had a major impact on their lives and over 15% report having been affected moderately by the new regulations. Approximately 58% of the respondents report sending money to relatives on the island.

Interestingly, approximately 15.6% of respondents would be very likely and 13.1% somewhat likely to return to the island to live if the country became democratic and restored the political and citizenship rights they lost upon leaving Cuba as exiles.

Ultimately, the Cuban-American story is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, Cuban Americans are held up as examples of the "immigrant success story" because of the notable gains they have made in empowering themselves in the new country. The well-documented economic success as strong entrepreneurs and equally impressive achievements through the ballot box have resulted in the creation of a solid ethnic enclave often viewed as the harbinger of the multiethnic American future. Yet, the Cuban-American identity is not an immigrant identity but one of exiles. The exile story is one of the relentless and enduring pursuit of the exile goal of recovering the homeland by triumphing over the regime responsible for their exile. This pursuit has frequently led to unfortunate episodes and behaviours, most evident during the Elián González saga, in which Cuban Americans were heavily criticized by many non-Cubans in Miami and throughout the nation. It is a story of frustration, misunderstandings, and resentment. The contrast of the two stories is indeed ironic. If the goal of exiles is to recover the homeland, and the job of immigrants is to successfully adjust economically and empower themselves in the new

country, then we can reach a paradoxical conclusion formulated first by University of Miami researcher Max Castro: Cubans in the US have been a failure at what they say they are, and a success at what they say they are not. ■

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## Chávez: Entre el romanticismo y el pragmatismo

*Miguel Ángel Santos*

Corría el mes de Febrero de 2002. El precio del petróleo venezolano, por encima de veinte dólares por barril durante los dos años previos, apenas superaba los dieciséis. El martes 18 de aquel mes, Chávez anunció un improbable paquete de medidas que incluían una devaluación de 40%, el incremento en la tasa del impuesto al valor agregado, la creación del impuesto al débito bancario, y un recorte del gasto público. El Fondo Monetario Internacional no lo habría hecho mejor. Un hecho puntual que descubrió lo que luego sería una de las claves del proceso *chavista*: Dentro de una orientación romántica de izquierda, no vacila en recurrir, cuando las circunstancias lo imponen, al más puro pragmatismo. Así, en medio de la cháchara antiimperialista, Estados Unidos sigue contabilizando más de la mitad del comercio internacional de Venezuela. En medio del resurgimiento del modelo de crecimiento hacia adentro (“desarrollo endógeno”), Venezuela ha alcanzado récord de importaciones. El año pasado, en medio de una galopante bonanza petrolera, la importación de vehículos de lujo se duplicó, así como el surgimiento de un enriquecimiento rápido por parte de algunos empresarios. Algunos líderes de la revolución se desplazan por Caracas en Audi, Hummers, o en BMW.

Algunos, no todos. Dentro del proceso hay románticos que están promoviendo un “Nuevo socialismo” (o Socialismo Venezolano del Siglo XXI) y están convencidos de que el verdadero camino pasa por re-descubrir al “hombre nuevo”, una idea atada libremente al viejo concepto marxista de un hombre no motivado por metas económicas y progreso individual, sino por la riqueza social y la solidaridad. Como dice Juan Carlos Monedero, catedrático de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid traído a Venezuela como soporte ideológico: El hombre nuevo se descubre poniendo al hombre viejo ante nuevas circunstancias. Esas nuevas circunstancias están lejos de ser claras y Monedero, en una reciente presentación ante la Cámara de Comercio Venezolana-Americana, presentó tres diapositivas en *power point* con 52 bolitas que indicaban lo que no es el Socialismo Venezolano del Siglo XXI. No es comunismo ni capitalismo. No es ni el “viejo socialismo”, ni estatismo, pero nadie parece saber qué es.

Esa ala más romántica se impuso una vez culminadas las elecciones del pasado 3 de diciembre, que renovaron el mandato de Chávez hasta el 2012. Animados por el amplio margen electoral (63%-37%), algunos se

convencieron de que ya era hora de poner el dinero en donde se ponen las palabras. Así, diez días después de las elecciones se publicó un decreto que suspendía el acceso a divisas a tasa oficial para las importaciones de 3.500 productos. El gobierno dejó de intervenir el mercado paralelo de divisas (nueva referencia para los bienes excluidos del sistema oficial) y amenazó con ilegalizarlo. La administración cambiaria redujo la oferta de dólares en 50%. La idea era reducir las importaciones y promover la producción y el empleo nacional a través de esquemas de propiedad colectiva y comunitaria. Chávez adelantó estas iniciativas en un acto realizado la primera semana de enero, en donde además anunció la nacionalización de la compañía nacional de telefonía fija y de toda la red privada de empresas de energía eléctrica.

Los resultados no se hicieron esperar. En enero, el índice anualizado de inflación superó 20%, con los precios de los alimentos creciendo a una tasa de 32%. Las medidas anunciadas, junto con el sistema de controles de precios, provocaron un desabastecimiento de bienes básicos de 26%. La tasa de cambio en el mercado paralelo se depreció 20% en quince días.

Demasiado romanticismo. Chávez puso al Vicepresidente Jorge Rodríguez, antiguo rector del Consejo Nacional Electoral, al frente de un operativo de abastecimiento nacional. A través de importaciones masivas ha conseguido apaciguar el problema. Se revisó y corrigió la lista de 3.500 productos, se re-estableció el flujo de divisas a tasa oficial para financiar más importaciones. El gobierno intervino el mercado paralelo de divisas, con un efecto muy moderado. Algunos alimentos básicos tales como la leche, el pollo, el queso, el café y el azúcar siguen escaseando, tanto en supermercados como en MERCAL, la red pública de distribución de alimentos.

Que una vez más se haya impuesto el pragmatismo está lejos de significar que Venezuela está en buen camino. El gobierno continúa incrementando el gasto público, muy por encima del crecimiento en el ingreso petrolero, lo que ha resultado en déficit fiscal siete de los ocho años de gestión de Chávez. La inversión privada, paralizada por el virulento discurso antiempresarial y por la inseguridad jurídica, se mantiene en

## FOCAL Highlights

niveles mínimos. Luego de ocho años de incrementos sostenidos de la demanda por la vía del gasto público, el aparato productivo venezolano ya se encuentra funcionando a plena capacidad. Esto pone al gobierno ante la incómoda elección entre más inflación o más importaciones. Pero la política de incrementar el consumo a través de importaciones tiene sus límites. Por un lado, las liquidaciones de divisas a tasa oficial se aproximan al total obtenido a través de las exportaciones petroleras. Por el otro, las importaciones baratas ayudan a combatir la inflación, pero tienen efectos devastadores sobre el empleo.

En los últimos dos años, más de dos millones de personas han pasado a depender directamente del gobierno. El estancamiento de la inversión y del empleo en el sector privado está poniendo la posibilidad de subsistencia de una inmensa cantidad de venezolanos sobre los hombros del Estado. Se impone gradualmente la figura del gran empleador. Pero la renta petrolera no alcanza para dar empleo a todos los venezolanos que tienen edad y disposición de trabajar.

Mientras eso ocurre, Chávez adelanta un ambicioso programa que le permita monopolizar todos los canales, instituciones y mecanismos a través de los cuales el descontento social podría encauzarse políticamente. Trata de articular la acción de tres procesos convergentes: Reforma Constitucional, Ley Habilitante y Partido Unido, con la finalidad de reforzar y blindar su poder personal. La reforma constitucional persigue tres metas fundamentales: 1) eliminar cualquier rastro de contrapeso sobre el ejecutivo en general y sobre la Presidencia en particular; 2) recentralización total del estado (incluyendo cierta estipulación que permita remover rápidamente a gobernadores elegidos); y 3) establecer la reelección indefinida del Presidente. La promulgación de la ley autoriza al Presidente a gobernar por decreto por 18 meses, y a legislar sobre cada dominio de la vida del país. El Partido Unido servirá de instrumento civil por medio del cual Chávez se propone mantener su influencia sobre sus seguidores, eliminar a cualquiera que le haga sombra y asegurar su obediencia incondicional.

Así, el futuro de Venezuela vendrá determinado por tres corrientes de acontecimientos que ocurren en planos diferentes. En primer lugar, por el contraste entre la velocidad con la que progresa la concentración del poder en la figura de Chávez y la monopolización de los mecanismos de manifestación política, por un lado; y el deterioro gradual en la economía, por el otro. En segundo lugar, por quién prevalece en esa lucha mordaz que mantienen las alas romántica y pragmática del proceso. Y tercero, por la evolución de los precios petroleros en los mercados internacionales. En este último frente, todo parece indicar que todavía existe cierto margen de maniobra. ■

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