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COMMENTARY: VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY: BOLIVAR'S SHATTERED DREAM

Juan E. Chebly

Venezuela is one of the oldest democracies in Latin America, dating back to 1958, and has been under attack ever since. In many ways, Venezuela has traditionally been a liberal democracy, by US standards. Enjoying a free-market economy and ample social spending, it was even considered the 'Switzerland of Latin America'. In many ways Venezuela's strong institutions and resulting wellbeing were enough to fend off Fidel Castro's ideological and military incursions during the cold war (Analitica, 2010, October 10). But our love for freedom and our republic is not of last century, it dates to 1810 and the birth of a great nation free of oppression in all its forms, including slavery (INE, 2018, July 6).

Venezuela has served as a beacon of freedom in a land plagued by authoritarian rule over the centuries. Venezuelan armies never conquered, they liberated nations. Led by Simon Bolivar, the Liberator, Venezuelans stood by their neighbors in their quest for freedom and many gave their life to liberate six nations from oppression (Arana, 2013). Venezuela was also the main supplier of oil to the US and allied forces during World War 2, and even declared war on Hitler (Grisanti, 2015, November 15). Venezuela has been on the right side of history and freedom. Francisco de Miranda, one of its founding fathers fought alongside Washington to liberate the United States from oppression and his name is engraved in the Arc De Triomphe as a hero of the French Revolution (United Nations Educational, Scientific

and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2007). It is tragic then to see that Bolivar's name has been used and is still used to prop up that which he staunchly despised - tyrants.

The story of recent calamity in Venezuela can be explained however. History is relevant in

determining a sustainable future for all, and Venezuela's sustainable development has never been more compromised than in the last 20 years.

During the 1990's, income inequality had been high in comparison to the world's average. This had been a historic phenomenon across the region (World Bank, 2019). Despite this, substantial social spending had always been present in

Venezuela. In the 1970's Venezuela boasted one of the best public healthcare systems of the world, not to mention top-of-the-line public schools and universities (Polga-Hecimovich, 2017, June).

However, increasing corruption and decreasing oil prices saw the rise of populism in the 80's giving way to the stark economic, social and political decline of the 90's. This populist trend is clearly seen in the early 1980's when state revenue increased two-fold and coincidentally during election time, spending was increased fourfold. This trend was coupled with rampant corruption and mismanagement of public expenditure, but most importantly gave way to a new dynamic of political clientelism that has been so damaging to the region. It established a de facto system

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where social programs were used to buy political allegiance (Toro Hardy, 2012).

Hugo Chavez capitalized on these trends. Before being elected in 1999, he led a failed coup-d'etat in 1992 in which hundreds of Venezuelans died (Marco, 2017, February 5). He was jailed and later pardoned by president Rafael Caldera before running for office in 1998. Chavez masterfully called out the political and ruling classes and promised increased public spending and massive redistribution of wealth. He won the 1999 elections based on two main promises, ending corruption and increasing social spending.

It is worth noting that Chavez, when pressed by suspecting journalists, also promised he was not a socialist and proudly denounced Cuba as an authoritarian dictatorship (Bayly, 2014, July 28; Yanes, 2013, April 30).

The devil, however, is in the details. Venezuela under Chavez claimed to have achieved one of the lowest Gini coefficients in the region, reflecting a more equitable distribution of wealth. His so-called 'misiones' or social programs targeted crucial indicators that make up the United Nations Human Development Index. Namely these programs targeted education, health, vis-a-vis economic prosperity (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], n.d.). Indeed, there was social spending targeted to those in need, and this gave him almost instant global acclaim by those concerned with social justice. His antics at the UN General Assembly and his criticism of George W. Bush won him legions of followers across the world.

Social programs however were not a novelty in Venezuela. What was new was the incredible amount of oil windfall that Venezuela was receiving. When Chavez took office, oil was at around \$7 per barrel and when he passed away in 2013, the price was still hovering around \$100 per barrel (U.S. Energy Information Association [EIA], n.d.). Chavez had enjoyed an estimated 800 billion USD in oil revenue. Yet most of his social spending was not systemic (How Chávez and Maduro have impoverished Venezuela., 2017, April 6).

No significant infrastructure was built, actually most of it was quite frankly squandered. Folklore would say that Chavez gave away a lot of fish, but never taught or empowered anyone to learn how to fish on their own. This is the basis of political clientelism which he took to a whole new level, both in scale and in influence. For a long time now, it is well known that in order to access public benefits in Venezuela you need to be militant in the Socialist Party (PSUV). Not to mention holding any public post. This unfortunately led to the systematic destruction of checks and balances that characterize a true democracy. Even in the face of lost elections (even with mass manipulation of public resources, jailing of opposition candidates, banning of political parties and many more questionable tactics), Chavez and his people would find a way to undermine adverse results. In doing so, they also undermined any opposition, and ultimately democracy and freedom.

This is half of the story, as it is also well known that Chavez indiscriminately used state resources not only to buy allegiance at home, but also to gain geo-political influence across the world. Just looking at the Citgo heating oil subsidies, which is owned by the Venezuelan Government, to Bronx inhabitants (Kebede, 2007, December 14), illegal campaign contributions to propel friendly governments in Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador, to name a few, would be enough (How Latin America deals with campaign finance, 2017, March 2). However if this sounds outlandish, trying to explain how and why Cuba became a net oil exporter (of Venezuelan oil) would be an even bigger challenge (Index Mundi, n.d.). It is hence no surprise that Venezuela's military is infiltrated with Cubans. Castro's dream of using Venezuela's riches to export his 'revolución' seemed almost complete.

Chavez detractors say his only ideology, which continues to be implemented and justified to this day, was based simply in a constant assessment of how to stay in power by whatever means necessary. His disciples have publicly admitted this by saying they 'will never hand over power'. This of course is done over the nationalized state channels which resemble WW2 propaganda

machines (El Impulso, 2018, March 16).

His diehard supporters, power holders, and so-called sons would have you believe that Chavez held up to his promises. That he was a man of the people. That evil neoliberal empires of the world are at blame for the death of hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans - an unprecedented and self-inflicted humanitarian crisis which can be even compared to genocide. However, cynicism can only take you so far. The facts behind the current humanitarian crisis, where an estimated 300,000 Venezuelans are on the verge of death due to lack of food or medicine in Venezuela show that their Machiavellian fallacy cannot be farther from the truth. Venezuelans have suffered enough (United Nations [UN], 2018).

Chavez and his policies are indeed the cause of the current economic, social, and political crisis in Venezuela. Chavez not only broke his two main promises and, in the process, conned millions of Venezuelans, he did exactly the opposite. Chavez robbed Venezuelans of their best shot at attaining sustainable human development by squandering 800 billion USD in fourteen years (Restuccia, 2018, July). Chavez and Maduro robbed Venezuelans of basic human rights and have cost many Venezuelans their life. They now threaten to destroy their long-lasting democracy once and for all (Freedom House, 2018).

One thing we know for sure is that the policies of Chavez were nefarious at best and so is his so-called 'son' dictator Nicolas Maduro. The level of corruption under the Chavez and Maduro regimes is unparalleled in Latin American history. Some even refer to the Venezuelan dictatorship as a 'mafia state' (Insight Crime, 2018). Out of a plethora of corruption scandals and narco-trafficking claims, which were investigated by the latest Venezuelan Congress' anti-corruption committee and corroborated by countless independent reports, only one suffices to prove the point, the case of Alejandro Andrade, Chavez's former head of the Venezuelan National Treasury. Andrade has admitted to receiving over USD 1 billion in bribes and is currently serving jail time in

the US - and this is only one individual singled out in one case.

Nefarious policies, obsolete ideology, nepotism and despotic rule, negligence, corruption, narco-trafficking, are only some reasons to denounce the Maduro dictatorship as a mafia state. This, coupled with blatant human rights violations, mass exodus and a silent genocide, is why Venezuela's neighbors, including the United States and the international community, are right to stand united and honor a historical debt with the freedom thirsty people of Venezuela. This debt is a moral one and goes beyond any political affiliation, it is a bipartisan debt, a human debt. This debt is supported by international law as a responsibility of UN member states to protect Venezuelan people from genocide.

Now is the time to help the Venezuelan people stop the cycle of destruction and devastation with the leadership of Interim President Guaidó (President of Congress and legitimate democratic president of Venezuela) to deliver free and fair elections and the hope for a promising future with freedom and justice for all.

Simon Bolivar has many celebrated quotes. A famous one was once firmly engraved on the tunnels that welcome travelers into the Caracas valley until it was replaced by Castro's 'patria socialismo o muerte'. Simon Bolivar's quote read: "There is nothing so dangerous as to suffer Power to be vested for a long time in one citizen. The people become accustomed to obeying him, and he becomes accustomed to commanding, hence the origin of usurpation and tyranny."

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