Photo by Andrés E.Azpurua.

November 2007 protest against Chávez's proposed constitutional reform.

VENEZUELA

Venezuela's Prospects for Democracy

by Taylor Boas

Hugo Chávez's Venezuela is a hybrid state: it combines the anatomy of a democratic regime with the physiology of an authoritarian one. While possessing democratic institutions such as political parties and labor unions, its actual functioning departs starkly from the democratic ideal. Yet, argued leftist critic Teodoro Petkoff, the narrow defeat of a referendum on constitutional reform in December 2007 thwarted an even more drastic potential outcome, the institution of a de facto totalitarian state.

Petkoff, a former guerrilla leader, two-time presidential candidate and planning minister under Chávez's predecessor, Rafael Caldera, began his talk at CLAS by analyzing the "Copernican change" in Latin American politics that has resulted in the left's recent electoral success. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, he maintained, brought an end to the United States' Cold War strategy of preventing leftists from coming to power in its sphere of influence. In the 1990s, Latin America's left-of-center political parties not only were able to govern without fear of U.S. military intervention, they also no longer had to define themselves in terms of the Soviet Union or Cuba merely because their ideological stances differed from that of the United States.

This newfound freedom has led to the emergence of a broad array of leftist governments in Latin America, which Petkoff grouped into two general categories. The leaders of the first group, the "democratic and modern" left, learned from the Cold War and the region's military dictatorships and have fully embraced democratic methods and goals. The second group, in which Petkoff placed Hugo Chávez, views democracy in purely instrumental terms. Its leaders may seek power through elections, but they do not respect democratic norms in the exercise of power once in office.

Chávez's rise to power in Venezuela occurred at a moment in which the country's two traditional political parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democratic Party (COPEI), had been severely discredited by their inability to respond to deepening social and economic problems. The first sign of political crisis was the "Caracazo" of 1989, in which thousands of people took to the streets to protest economic austerity measures, and at least 300 civilians were killed by security forces. Three years later, left-leaning military officers launched two coups

against President Carlos Andrés Pérez, the first of which was led by Chávez. The traditional parties' loss of legitimacy was confirmed in 1993, when corruption charges drove Pérez from office and Rafael Caldera was elected president as the head of a coalition of small, leftist and center-right parties — including the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), which Petkoff helped found in 1971. Several of these parties, including MAS, went on to support Chávez in his successful 1998 bid for the presidency, prompting Petkoff to break from the party.

Since taking office in 1999, Chávez has withstood both legal and extralegal efforts to unseat him. Petkoff cited four particularly strong bases of political support as central to the president's hold on power. The "spinal column" of his regime is the sector from which he originated: the armed forces. A second key constituency is the "boli-bourgeoisie," the nouveau riche who have profited under Chávez's rule, many through corrupt business dealings. The Venezuelan state bureaucracy — which has doubled in size during the Chávez administration — constitutes a third power base. Finally, Chávez retains strong popular support. Through his *misiones*, social programs targeting the poor, the president has helped bring about major improvements in the lives of millions of long-neglected Venezuelan citizens.

While Chávez's oil-fueled social spending has gained him a large following among the poor, Petkoff questioned its long-term sustainability as well as the general health of the Venezuelan economy. The current boom in oil prices has facilitated economic growth on the order of 10 percent per year from 2005 to 2007, but, Petkoff argued, the nature of this growth has created a number of economic problems. With so much money pouring into the economy, inflation has soared to three times the Latin American average, while price controls on basic goods such as milk, beans and sugar have led to shortages. The country's economic problems are exacerbated by an overvalued currency: the official rate has been fixed at 2,150 bolívars to the dollar since 2005 while the black market rate is more than twice as high, at over 5,000 bolívars to the dollar. This discrepancy makes non-oil exports expensive and imports cheap, discouraging domestic investment. While Venezuela earned $60 billion in oil revenues in 2007, it spent $45 billion on cheap imports, Petkoff maintained. The government's promotion of imports is "the most important enemy of [Chávez's] own policy of endogenous development," he added.

In this context of strong political support combined with a potentially unstable economic situation, Chávez proposed a series of wide-ranging constitutional reforms in a December 2007 referendum. These reforms, Petkoff insisted, would have eliminated the last vestiges of Venezuela's old

Photo by Sheila Steele.

Chávez speaks in front of a painting of Simón Bolívar.

democracy. While governors and mayors would continue to be elected under the proposed regime, a superstructure of unelected secondary vice presidents would be created above them, diluting their authority. Although the president would have enjoyed potentially unlimited reelection, governors and mayors would still have been subject to term limits. The reforms also proposed "ambiguous" changes in the legal status of private property — something that may have alarmed even those with only modest assets.

Finally, the reforms would have changed the structure of the Venezuelan military. In a country where "Bolivarian" is widely understood as a synonym for *chavista*, the official name of the National Armed Forces would have been changed to the Bolivarian Armed Forces. And Chávez's personal control over the military would have been more than merely symbolic. While the president currently oversees promotions to the rank of general, the proposed reform would have given Chávez direct authority over the career advancement of all officers. According to Petkoff, such changes would ensure that "cadets at the academy understand immediately that to be promoted you must lick the soil of the boots of the president."

In the narrow defeat of the proposed constitutional reforms by a margin of 51 percent to 49 percent, Petkoff

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Intellectuals and Totalitarianism

by Teodoro Petkoff

Why is there so much uncritical admiration for Hugo Chávez and his policies in international circles among intellectuals and the left? Many of these people are quick to criticize governments on the right but give Chávez their unconditional support. How do you explain this phenomenon?

Photo by CLAS staff.

Teodoro Petkoff.

Teodoro Petkoff: Mark Lilla, an American, wrote an important book called *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*. I recommend it because he examines the fascination of 20th century intellectuals with strongmen and totalitarianism. Lilla draws on the examples of Heidegger, who was a member of the Nazi party; Carl Schmitt, the theoretician of Nazism; and the politics of the Frenchman Jacques Derrida, to examine the attraction of some intellectuals to totalitarianism.

I know my own country's intellectuals very well. The majority of Venezuelan intellectuals are against Chávez. This is a revolution without intellectuals.

Outside Venezuela, there is a different perception. David Viñas is a very well-known Argentine writer. He told me once, "I must support Chávez — he is giving cheap oil to Fidel!" Regardless of what is happening in Venezuela, all Viñas cares about is Chávez giving cheap oil to Cuba.

We saw the same tendency with the Soviet Union and Stalin. Around the world, well-known intellectuals, poets and writers — Louis Aragon in France; Rafael Alberti, in Spain; Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez and, for some time, Mario Vargas Llosa in Latin America; and many others — supported Soviet communism uncritically. Having only a superficial understanding of the character of totalitarian societies, what they espoused to their audiences was an irresponsible abuse of their role.

How can you explain Sartre's Maoist politics? How can a Frenchman, living in France, understand Maoist realities? When an intellectual of the French Communist Party denounced the Soviet gulags, Sartre called it an "imperialist lie." How do we understand this? The relationship between intellectuals and totalitarianism is not reflexive. At the same time that Sartre was apologizing for the gulag, Albert Camus was identifying the murky history Sartre and some others had with Nazism in France. Camus, however, was consistently anti-totalitarian. During the occupation, Camus was the editor of Combat, the underground newspaper. He was against the gulag and the Soviet model from the beginning.

We can also consider the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind*. In the novel, Milosz tries to explain the behavior of four nameless intellectuals who consciously accept a totalitarian regime. He describes what happens in the minds of these people, the fascination they have with totalitarian solutions.

Perhaps the fascination comes from Rousseau's conception of the common will of the people. Maybe it comes from Saint-Just, Robespierre's right-hand, who once said, "What constitutes a republic is the total destruction of everything that stands in opposition to it." Well, that philosophy is the birth certificate of totalitarianism. Years later, it is Fidel's same phrase: "Inside the Revolution, everything; outside the Revolution, nothing." But, who says who or what is inside the Revolution? Fidel.

In hindsight, it's surprising that some of the most prominent intellectuals of the 20th century supported Stalinism. They were blind to clearly presented evidence of excesses. I should say that when I was a member of the Communist Party, I was the same way. But I was in Venezuela. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, we didn't think about Hungary — we had our hands full opposing the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship.

In 1968, however, when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia we were older, more mature, and we could read the coverage with open eyes. We saw it for what it was.

This article was adapted from Teodoro Petkoff's response to a question from a member of the audience at his CLAS talk on January 25, 2008.

found reason to be cautiously optimistic about Venezuela's political future. Chávez miscalculated, Petkoff argued, by trying to turn the constitutional referendum into a vote for or against his own political movement. The president not only suffered his first electoral defeat since winning office in 1998, he also garnered 3 million fewer votes than in December 2006, when 7.3 million people (63 percent) voted for his reelection. Many of those voting "No" in the 2007 referendum did so because they disagreed with the proposed changes, not necessarily because they opposed Chávez. But the referendum's defeat has damaged Chávez's aura of invincibility, in part because he put so much political capital into the campaign. If the president's charismatic authority is seen as declining, Petkoff suggested, the loyalty of his supporters in the military, state apparatus and "boli-bourgeoisie" may begin to waver.

For Petkoff, the most promising aspect of the constitutional reform referendum was the emergence of a new opposition movement committed to democratic tactics. In the first stage of opposition to the Chávez administration, from 1999 to 2003, opponents sought the president's ouster through an attempted coup, open criticism by the military and a 62-day-long oil sector strike. In addition to being anti-democratic, these efforts were counterproductive, as they ended up strengthening Chávez's political position. The second stage of opposition, beginning with the 2004 recall referendum, was also a miscalculation, in Petkoff's view. The president's opponents alleged electoral fraud, despite the absence of confirming evidence, and then went on to boycott the 2005 municipal elections, facilitating chavista victories.

In the third, most recent stage of opposition, Petkoff characterized anti-Chávez forces as being both more democratic and more prudent. Most importantly, the emerging protest movement, led by middle-class university students, has learned from the tactical mistakes of earlier efforts. Rather than advocating Chávez's ouster, the student movement opposes the president's most controversial policies, such as the proposed constitutional reform and the closing of Radio Caracas Televisión in May 2007. The current Venezuelan opposition movement, Petkoff concluded, "is married [to] the idea of a democratic strategy, and from my point of view, it is the only field in which we can confront Chávez with possibilities of success."

Teodoro Petkoff, founder of the Venezuelan newspaper Tal Cual, is a prominent critic of President Hugo Chávez as well as a former guerrilla leader, two-time presidential candidate and planning minister under Chávez's predecessor Rafael Caldera. He gave a talk for CLAS on January 25, 2008.

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A line forms for milk rations in Venezuela.

Photo by Rafael Navarro.