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Venezuela

Venezuela's political forces

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Venezuela is today divided into two camps, the 'Chavistas' and the 'escualidos' ('spineless ones'). Neither of these camps is homogeneous. We attempt here an explanatory synthesis of who's who in this especially complex political panorama. The Chavez phenomenon has succeeded in blowing apart political delimitations. If the immense majority of political and social forces who support Chavez position themselves in the camp of the 'left' or the 'revolution', the opposition groups primarily the sectors of the 'right' but also divisions of the 'left', indeed some who originate from the 'revolutionary left'.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/33venez.jpg>]

On the side of the opposition partisans of a putschist solution and supporters of an institutional solution (referendum or election) coexist.

The parties making up the opposition are the parties of the old system - AD, COPEI.

The majority of the MAS leadership, after having supported Chavez, has gone over to the opposition. The MAS was a social democratic evolution from a wing of the PCV that integrated itself into the institutional game in 1970. Its principal leader, Teodoro Petkoff, left the MAS in 1998 when it took the decision to support Chavez. He was a minister in the rightwing government of Caldera (1993-1998), in charge of the ministry of planning. He scrupulously applied the diktats of the IMF. The minority of the leadership created the PODEMOS party, which is the reformist wing of the Chavez government.

However, the opposition also includes parties originating from the far left like Bandera Roja or La Causa Radical, or groups originating from the Chavismo of 1998.

Bandera Roja is a group originating from the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left - created in 1962, it fused with the MAS in the 1980s) which rejected the abandonment of armed struggle (Bandera Roja opted for pro-Albanian positions). This group, today implanted essentially in the universities, had supported and hoped to participate in the attempted military insurrection of February 4, 1992. Today, while arguing that the Chavez government is neoliberal, it participates in the Democratic Coordination which includes the most anti- Communist elements in Venezuela. Chavez supporters consider it as the armed wing of the Democratic Coordination; numerous assassinations portrayed as government acts by the opposition have been attributed to it.

La Causa Radical, created in 1971 from a group of Communist militants who rejected the rightward evolution of both the MAS and the PCV, was for a long time the most interesting party in Venezuela. A heterodox Marxist group, it was the party closest to Chavez at the time of the civilian-military insurrection of February 4, 1992. After the defeat of the insurrection, its candidate, Andres Velazquez, came close to winning the presidential election of 1993 but fraud robbed him of victory. Chavez refused to call for a vote for Velasquez in 1993, preferring to call for abstention as a means of delegitimizing the Venezuelan political system. In 1997, La Causa Radical split, giving birth to the PPT, which supports Chavez. La Causa Radical is currently a member of the Democratic Coordination and calls for the organization of a new constituent assembly.

Chavez's right hand man during the insurrection of 4 February 1992, Francisco Arias Cardenas, who supported Chavez in 1998, became the candidate of the entire opposition in 1999 during the second presidential election in the framework of the new constitution. While Chavez rejected electoral participation in 1993 and up until 1998, Arias Cardenas was elected governor of one of the Venezuelan states with the support of the parties of the system in

1995. He created his party, Union, in 1999.

Solidaridad is the party of the supporters of Luis Miquilena, who was Chavez's political mentor until 2001. Miquilena was imprisoned under the dictatorship because of his Communist activities. Between the 1960s and 1990s, he made a fortune in insurance. Chavez broke with him at the end of 2001, and Miquilena became one of the coup plotters.

Bandera Roja, the MAS, Causa Radical, Union and Solidaridad propose the establishment of a centre left bloc (which is indicative of the change in the nature of Bandera Roja).

Among the participants in this great heterogeneous coordination can also be found the owners of the means of communication, prominent figures in TV and print journalism and the association 'Gente del Petroleo', made up essentially of former directors of the oil company.

Two elements allow us to understand the successive departures of the Chavez government. First, opportunism is a basic characteristic of the old Venezuelan political system. The proliferation of parties is not based on clear political concepts but rather the necessity for a certain number of leaders to equip themselves with a political structure to stake a claim to occupy posts inside the state apparatus. When it became obvious, in 1998, that Chavez would win the presidential election, numerous political groups rallied to him to become part of the majority bloc. When the hopes of gaining a ministry or a share of power were disappointed, the parties joined the opposition. At the regional level, an alliance can group parties which confront each other at the national level.

A second factor has been the radicalization of the hard core of Chavismo. When he came to power in 1998, Chavez was not as radical as he was in 2001 when he instituted land reform, reform of the laws on fishing, banks, and so on. This was more radical than what many supporters of Chavismo in 1998 could accept.

This was one of the reasons for the departure of Miquilena, for example, or the split of the MAS. Meanwhile, other political forces, not very defined ideologically, rallied to Chavez's cause, notably among youth.

Three main parties support the Chavez government: Podemos, the PPT and the MVR (Fifth Republic Movement). The MVR is by far the most important party in terms of numbers of activists. It was created by Hugo Chavez for the election of 1998. It initially brought together all the supporters of Chavez, whether from the centre, the left or the radical left. Now the MVR also includes politicians originating from the old system who are recycling themselves through Chavismo. Until now, the MVR has not possessed a democratic apparatus and the rank and file members have joined primarily to support Chavez. MVR leaders speak of a million party members.

The PODEMOS party, originating from the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo), is the 'reasonable' component of Chavismo. Originating from a European-style social democratic tradition, it represents the right wing of the Chavez government and defends the measures of popular participation implemented by the government. A clean up of the administration and the idea that it is necessary to inject ethics into political life are the bases of its participation in the ruling bloc.

The PPT is the most interesting party in the ruling alliance although the weakest electorally. With only one deputy and three governors, the PPT has responsibility for several ministries including labour, education and culture. The president of the national oil company is a member of the PPT. From a Marxist tradition, the PPT is the product of the split in La Causa Radical. Of the three parties in power, it is the best structured. An annual congress defines its political orientation and its national leadership with a significant level of participation by the activist rank and file. At its 5th congress, it defined itself as a party of the left, revolutionary and humanist. It defines itself as a movement of movements and intervenes in trades unionism ('Autonomia Sindical', a member of the UNT), among youth ('Jovenes

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por la Patria'), the women's movement ('Movimiento Manuelita Saenz'), and in local communities. Its analyses on capitalist globalization share many of the concerns of the Fourth International. If it does not define itself as communist, a number of its leaders do so on a personal basis. During the coup in April 2002, it was a decisive political force in the reconquest of power.

Finally, a constellation of small parties and small regional, local, indeed neighbourhood political forces constitute the rank and file network of Chavismo.

We should also mention the role played by activists of Trotskyist origin, notably in the Democratic and Classist Bloc of Carabobo, an industrial state in the centre of the country. This bloc is a member of the new trade union the UNT. Also, the excellent website aporrea.org, a kind of autonomous press agency of the Bolivarian revolution, is organized by activists of Trotskyist origin.