

Boaventura de Sousa Santos

Chavez: The legacy and the challenges

The most charismatic, democratic political leader in decades is dead. Whenever charisma plays a role in a democratic context, it establishes a particularly mobilizing political relationship between rulers and the ruled, as it adds to democratic legitimacy an identity of belonging and a sharing of goals that go way beyond political representation. Well used to being hit by a distant, oppressive power (which tends to thrive in low intensity democracies), the popular classes come to experience a bridging of the gap between the represented and their representatives. Opponents will then speak of populism and authoritarianism, but they will seldom convince any voters. This is because, in a democratic context, charisma allows for levels of democratic civic education that are otherwise very difficult to attain. Such unique chemistry between charisma and democracy tends to strengthen both of these, especially when it brings about measures aimed at the social redistribution of wealth. The problem with charisma is that it ends with the leader. In order to move on without the leader, democracy needs to be strengthened by two ingredients whose chemistry is equally difficult to obtain, especially in a post-charismatic period: institutionality and popular participation.

As they shout ;\$We are all Chavez!;" in the streets of Caracas, the people are lucidly aware of the fact that there was only one Chavez and that the Bolivarian revolution is bound to have enemies, both internal and external, who are strong enough to challenge the keen democratic experience that he offered them over the course of fourteen years. President Lula of Brazil was also a charismatic leader. President Dilma, who came after him, has built on the strong institutionality of the Brazilian state and of Brazilian democracy, but has found it difficult to complement it with popular participation. Venezuelan institutions are much less strong, but on the other hand the thrust of participation is much higher there. It is in this context that one must analyze Chavez;'s legacy and the challenges ahead.

Chavez;'s legacy

The redistribution of wealth. Like other Latin American leaders, Chavez took

advantage of the boom in natural resources (mostly oil) to carry out an unprecedented program of social policies ;V especially in such areas as education, health, housing and infrastructure ;V that substantially improved the lives of the overwhelming majority of the population. To name a few examples: free compulsory education; literacy campaigns for over a million and a half people, which led UNESCO to declare Venezuela ;\$an illiteracy-free territory;"; the reduction of extreme poverty, from 40% in 1996 to 7.3% at present; the reduction of infant mortality, from 25 per 1000 to 13 per 1000 during the same period; popular restaurants for low-income groups; the increase of the minimum wage ;V which, according to ILO, is now the highest in the region. Thus it was that Saudi Venezuela ceded place to Bolivarian Venezuela.

Regional integration. Chavez was the indefatigable architect of the integration of the Latin American subcontinent. This, however, was no mean calculated move on his part, with mere survival and hegemony in view. Chavez was the firmest believer in Simon Bolivar;|s notion of the Great Homeland. He viewed the substantive political differences among countries as mere discussions within a large family. As soon as the opportunity arose, he sought to resume ties with the most reluctant, most pro-US member of the family: Colombia.

He tried to expand the exchanges between Latin American countries well beyond trade relations, while making sure that they were based on a logic of solidarity, socio-economic complementarity and reciprocity, as opposed to a capitalist logic. His solidarity towards Cuba is well known, but it was equally decisive with regard to Argentina during its 2001-2002 sovereign debt crisis, as well as with the smaller countries of the Caribbean.

He was an enthusiast for all forms of regional integration that might help the continent stop being the US's backyard. He spearheaded ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), then ALBA-TCP (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America v Peoples; Trade Treaty), as an alternative to the US-sponsored FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas), but he also wanted to be a member of Mercosur. Two other institutions for the integration of the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean spurred by Chavez were CELAC (the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and UNASUR (Union of South American Nations).

Anti-imperialism. In the most critical periods of his rule (including fending off the 2002 coup attempt), Chavez had to face the United State's most aggressive unilateralism (George W. Bush), which was to reach its most destructive height with the invasion of Iraq. Chavez believed that what happened in the Middle East would also befall Latin America if the latter did not prepare itself for such an eventuality. Hence his interest in regional integration. But he also believed that the only way to stop the U.S.A. would be by fomenting multilateralism, thus reinforcing what was left of the Cold War. Hence the closer ties with Russia, China and Iran. He knew that the U.S.A. (with the support of the E.U.) would go on ;\$freeing; every single country that happened to challenge Israel or pose a threat to the access to oil. Hence the ;\$liberation; of Libya, followed by Syria and, in the near future, also Iran. Hence also the U.S. and the E.U.'s ;\$lack of interest; in ;\$freeing; the country that is ruled by the most retrograde dictatorship of all, Saudi Arabia.

21st century socialism. Chavez was not successful in building 21st century socialism, which he termed Bolivarian socialism. What would the model for such socialism be, especially given that he always revered the Cuban experiment, viewed as excessive by many? I find it somewhat reassuring that on several occasions Chavez approvingly quoted my own

definition of socialism: "Socialism is democracy without end." Granted, these were speeches, whereas in practice things would always prove more difficult and complex. He wanted Bolivarian socialism to be peaceful but still armed, lest it end up like Salvador Allende's. He put a stop to the neoliberal project and to the IMF's interference in the country's economy; he nationalized companies, thus incurring the ire of foreign investors, who took revenge through an impressive campaign of demonization, both in Europe (mainly Spain) and the U.S.A. He dismantled existing capitalism, but failed to replace it. Hence the supply and investment crises, inflation, and the growing dependence on oil revenues. He polarized the class struggle and put on the defensive both the old and the new capitalist classes, which had long held a near monopoly of the media and had always kept control of finance capital. Polarization hit the streets and many saw the large increase in crime as a consequence of it (but would they say as much about the crime increase in Sao Paulo or Johannesburg?).

The communal state. Chavez knew that the state apparatus built by the oligarchies that had always held sway over the country would do anything to bring to a halt the new revolutionary process, which, unlike other experiments in the past, was born of democracy and fed on it. So he sought to establish parallel structures, characterized by popular participation in public management. First there were the misiones and gran misiones, an extensive program of government policies in a variety of sectors, each bearing its own

suggestive name (e.g. the Mision Barrio Adentro, providing health services to the popular class), enlisting popular participation and Cuban help. Next came the institutionalization of popular power, a spatial plan implemented alongside the one already in place (consisting of states and municipalities). Its central cell was the commune; its basic principle, social property; and the construction of socialism, its main goal. Contrary to other Latin American experiments, where the attempt is made to combine representative democracy and participatory democracy (as is the case of participatory budgeting and sectorial popular councils), the communal state assumes a confrontational relationship between these two forms of democracy. That is perhaps its major weakness.

The challenges before Venezuela and the continent

What we have now is the beginning of the post-Chavez era. Will there be political and economic instability? Will the Bolivarian Revolution move forward? Is chavismo possible without Chavez? Will it withstand the likely strengthening of the opposition? The challenges are formidable. Here are some of them.

Civil-military unity. Chavez based his power on two foundations: democratic adherence on the part of the popular classes and political unity between civil power and the military. Such unity has always been problematic throughout the continent, and whenever it did exist, it was always of a conservative and even dictatorial bent. A member of the military himself, Chavez achieved a progressive kind of unity that provided the system with stability. In order to do it, however, he had to give economic power to the military, which, in addition to being a potential source of corruption, may in the future turn against the Bolivarian revolution or subvert its transformative, democratic spirit, which pretty much amounts to the same thing.

Extractivism. The Bolivarian revolution increased the dependence on oil and natural resources in general. This is far from being a Venezuelan phenomenon, as it can also be found in other countries ruled by governments that we view as progressive, such as Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador or Bolivia. Excessive dependence on resources is blocking the diversification of the economy while destroying the environment. Most of all, it constitutes an ongoing assault on the indigenous and peasant populations where those resources are to be

found, as their waters get polluted, their ancestral rights are disregarded, international law ;V which requires that local populations be consulted ;V is violated, people are expelled from their lands, and community leaders are murdered. Just last week we heard of the murder of Sabino Romero, a great indigenous leader from the Sierra de Perija (Venezuela) to whose struggle I have lent my solidarity for many years now. Will Chavez ;|s successors know how to tackle this issue?

The political regime. Even when legitimized through democratic mechanisms, a political regime shaped by a charismatic leader is bound to be problematic for his successors. In Venezuela the challenges are formidable. On the one hand there is the weakness of institutions in general, while on the other we have the creation of a parallel institutionality ;V the communal state ;V dominated by the party that was once started by Chavez, the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela). In case the one-party temptation takes root, it will be the end of the Bolivarian revolution. The PSUV is an aggregate of a variety of factions, and coexistence amongst them has been difficult. Now that Chavez ;|s unifying figure is gone, ways for expressing internal diversity must be found. Only through the practice of internal democracy exercised at a deep level will the PSUV be able to join the rest of the nation in articulating the democratic maturity that the country is going to need in order to ward off the

assault on the part of the political forces bent on the piecemeal destruction of all that has been conquered by the popular classes over these years. Allowing corruption to run rampant and suppressing all differences with statements to the effect that everybody is a Chavista and that one is more Chavista than the next person, is tantamount to opening the way to the enemies of the revolution. One thing is certain: if Chavez's example is to be followed, then it is imperative that criticism be not suppressed. The authoritarianism that has been a hallmark of vast sectors of the Latin American left needs to be put aside once and for all.

The great challenge for the progressive forces of the continent is to be able to tell between Chavez's disputatious, and certainly controversial, style and the substantive political thrust of his rule, which unequivocally favored the popular classes and a solidarity-driven integration of the subcontinent. The conservative forces will do everything to blur them. Chavez contributed decisively to the consolidation of democracy in the social imaginary. He did consolidate it where it is hardest for it to be betrayed ;V the heart of the popular classes, which is also where betrayal is most perilous. Can anybody envisage the popular classes in so many other countries around the world shedding bitter tears for the death of a democratic political leader in the same way as Venezuelans are now inundating TV sets all over the planet? That is quite a precious heritage for both Venezuelans and Latin Americans. It would be a crime to waste it.

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