

*South American country tries to get out of a dramatic crisis*

## **Venezuela, the thin red line**

*Forty years of democracy (and corruption) were not enough to harmonize a society divided by injustice. The oil wealth revealed itself, as usual, a curse. Hugo Chavez seemed to be the messiah of "Bolivarian revolution", now he looks like the idiot brother of Lula. But the opposition that paralyzed the country for two months is far worse. The hope to get out of the nightmare of civil war is proclaimed in all Venezuelan people.*

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In Venezuela, a thin red line separates truth from lies, political propaganda, the reality of appearances. A thin red line divides the darker pessimism from the most optimistic hopes. It is as if the country was pregnant, with a long and difficult gestation, and it did not know yet whether eventually it gives birth to a monster, a creature or a new historical abortion.

To the western media there is only one father, the President Hugo Chavez Frias, the man who would have fecundated the history of Venezuela through an election intercourse lasted two years, from 1998 (the year of the first surprising election) to 2000 (the year of reappointment after the approval of the new constitution).

But creation relation can be inverted: it is "little Venice", Venezuela, to have generated Chavez and Chavism, just as it had created Simon Bolivar out of nothing, the great Liberator of South America, the point of reference of every commander, every president, every dictator of this indefinable country.

Squares and streets in Caracas constantly remind the two: monuments, statues and banners for Bolivar, graffiti on walls (pro and con, more pro than con) and even on churches for Chavez. Slogans and insults, insults and slogans. An endless series, which continues in newspapers (most against Chavez) and television (most against Chavez).

The President, however, has available his good state channel and the opportunity to go on air whenever he wants with unified networks (the dreadful *cadena*s, endless messages to the nation placed often in the middle of the most-watched soap operas or during baseball matches, the national sport).

From the bottom of their role as spectator-voters, Venezuelans observe and judge, probably wiser than their leaders imagine them, even if ignorance of average Venezuelan is large compared to that of an European.

With Chavez or against Chavez, a fight that the two factions would like titanic, Manichean, good versus evil, but it is childish, grotesque, painful. And misleading. Both pro-Chavez and anti-Chavez would represent people, but people seem increasingly skeptical.

For those who love the simplifications, we can say that the majority of poor people are with Chavez, but the majority of poor people does not necessarily mean the majority of the country. "Chavez is a product of Venezuela history, more precisely, he is a product of the political vacuum in this country". Agustin Blanco Munoz, professor of modern history at the University Central of Venezuela, has a very clear Marxist vision, about Chavez and the relationship between Venezuelan society and its leaders.

A relationship between rulers and ruled, that comes from the deep trauma of America invasion (the one that usually is called "discovery") of 1492 and reproduces ad infinitum in various forms the relationship between colonists and colonized, which is never really put into question, neither in nor out. "The independence of 1811, for example, - says Munoz - is just a deal that allows heroes and bosses, soldiers and civilians to be the country new owners".

There is a liberal, secular, more innovative line more related to trade, and a conservative, more traditional religious one linked to the land; there is a form of civil government and a military one,

but in essence, "freedom is for capital, its commerce, its industry".

The state is the guarantor of the safety and property of the oligarchy, in all its forms, from social democracy to military dictatorship, against "poor people"

Chavez would be just the latest product of this history, a revolutionary in words, yet another "man of providence" that does not change the root of the social system, does not affect its fundamental injustice. It looks like the vision of Eduardo Galeano in his classic "Open Veins of Latin America": "... The well-being of our ruling classes - dominant inside, dominated from outside - is the curse of our multitudes condemned to a life as pack animals".

But Venezuela also has a different history, different from all other Latin American countries.

"If you make the comparison with the past, or with other states, you can say that democracy exists in Venezuela, no doubt", says Professor Samuel Moncada, another professor of history at the University of Central Venezuela.

He immediately quotes a concrete fact, in support of his version of events: "This university was founded in 1725: graduates were 30 thousand in over two centuries, until 1958; but from 1958 to 1995 they were 170 thousand, sign of a dramatically changed society, where education is no longer the exclusive privilege of a caste of oligarchs".

The choice of dates is not accidental: in 1958, the last military dictatorship in Venezuela stops, the one of Perez Jimenez.

But the first real blow of libertarian Venezuelan society dates back to 1935, the death of the great dictator and absolute ruler of Venezuela, Juan Vicente Gómez. A very long despotic tunnel ended, actually begun in 1908.

Twenty-seven years that see the transformation of the country in three key areas: the transition to oil; urbanization (with population growth), the affirmation of civil society and its democratic aspirations.

The exploitation of oil began in 1914, and in 1926 Venezuelan economy can already be considered an oil economy, given that more than half of exports must be black gold extracted, almost all from the huge lake of Maracaibo.

The rural society, linked to the large landed estate and the production of cocoa and coffee, begins to decline rapidly, and just as quickly the population begins to leave the countryside to the cities. Caracas is multiplied by seven in thirty years, and it becomes the center of political life. The leader par excellence of this new phase is Romulo Betancourt. Communist training, Betancourt opts for a non-ideological, moderate and populist left. His party Accion Democratica (AD) continues the popular demands for social advancement.

On the right, it is Rafael Caldera's Catholic nationalism to point the reactionary instincts of traditional industries towards a sort of Christian Democratic Party, which later is called COPEI and it creates the perfect two-party system (perfect especially in the power-sharing) alternating with "adecos" (those of Accion Democratica).

But the game with the army is still to play, in the forties.

When Gomez's successors find people in the streets, they do not know what to do: between the indiscriminate slaughter and the openness to new political forces, they choose the latter approach. But the process is fraught with difficulties: soldiers themselves who allow the first free elections in 1947, take back power shortly later, with Colonel Marcos Perez Jimenez.

"My policy is to build", says the last modernizing *caudillo* and he carries out his dictatorship with great works, infrastructure, bridges, roads and buildings funded by oil.

In his quietly racist vision, it is important to ethnically improve Venezuelan people, made up largely by mixed race descendants of Indians and blacks slaves, considered lazy and irrational for the genetic inheritance. Doors open for European immigration from poor countries, Latin and Catholic Spain, Portugal, Italy.

These were years of strong growth, Venezuela promises excellent prospects.

Surely they are not the protagonists of the fall of the regime of Perez Jimenez (indeed they suffer a number of reprisals), neither the triumphant return of democracy and Romulo Betancourt in 1958. In 1961 the new constitution is approved, the twenty-sixth since independence which will last until

1999, until the advent of Chavez...

The Sixties are the most turbulent of Venezuelan history. Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara fired the continent, triggering the bite that for a quarter of a century is strangling democracy in the continent: Communist guerrillas, more or less backed by the Soviet Union, against fascist military regimes, shamelessly supported by the U.S.

Young Venezuelan democracy was born with a forced deal between the two part: it must fight against guerrillas and look away from the temptations of the army coup (coup attempts alternate as seasons).

Therefore, with the famous "Pact of Punto Fijo" an iron alliance was established between the left (Acciòn Democratica) and the right (COPEI), involving the Catholic Church, business and trade unions.

This is the greatness and at the same time the limit of Venezuelan political system, from the beginning. This country will never know the night of human rights, disappearances, death squads, torture chambers of all the other countries of the continent, even historically most advanced ones (such as Chile and Argentina).

In the seventies, Venezuela is the only free country existing between Panama Canal and Patagonia, and this is no small accomplishment.

But at the same time, the whole political system revolves around the fair division of oil cake.

It is a system rooting corruption at all levels, it eliminates conflicts by developing a culture of parasitic aberration, it builds an American-style consumerism mindset that is the triumph of the waste, ignorance and bad taste.

Democratic Venezuela in sixties is from the beginning a nation of *rentiers*, a state in which the abundance of oil is the key to solving every problem.

The revolutionary guerrilla fails mainly because it comes from the countryside, which are emptied in the meantime. Moreover, much of the land belongs to the state, even if just at this time a new class of landowners grab illegally thousands of abandoned acres.

In 1966, the guerrillas was already militarily defeated, and since 1969, just under the presidency of Democrat Caldera, have integrated into the political system, almost without exception: they all advance their career (one of them, Ali Rodriguez Araque is now the chairman of the powerful state oil company PDVSA).

The Seventies are experienced not only in absolute contrast with the rest of the continent, but to the whole world. These were the years of "Saudi Venezuela", the oil bonanza, given by the continuing rise in oil prices. To reap the benefits of the bonanza is especially President Carlos Andres Perez of AD (the left is back in power).

In the decade 1973-1983 a flood of petrodollars is overturned in the country: a barrel of crude oil increased from 4 to 12 dollars in one year (1974), and in 1980 it is more than doubled (30 dollars) to reach record high (36 dollars) in 1983, the year that marks the beginning of the economic crisis, however.

Caracas has become "a center of oil culture that prefers the consumption to creation and that increases artificial needs to hide the real ones" writes prophetic Eduardo Galeano ("The Open Veins of Latin America", 1971). But "in tin shacks on the hills, over half a million forgotten people contemplate from their huts surrounded by garbage, the waste of others". Here is the economic and social time bomb that nobody seems to hear the ticking.

Nobody does anything to reduce inequalities in society. No one realizes that people from Venezuela almost double in a decade (from eight to 14 million, they are now 24) with new poor immigrants from other South American countries, particularly Colombia.

The crumbs that fall from the table of the privileged ones seem to placate everyone, fat cows will never end, they think.

Thus, the parties, engaged in the painstaking slicing of the cake, move away from people who are not part of the game (AD arrives in the eighties to the crazy figure of 2 million 300 thousand party members).

The trade unions are limited to represent the many government employees: to find a job you have to

pay the bribe.

Entrepreneurs (if you can define them this way) proceed from an absurd investment to another, continually funded free grant by the state. They import everything, they do not produce almost nothing, the rich people go shopping in Miami every week.

Banks, issue of the political system, continue to grant credit to virtually unlimited number of clients, of course, "friends of friends."

None pays, none refunds, so there is oil. Carlos Andres Perez nationalizes the industry of refining and distributing oil: PDVSA, the mother of all wealth, which becomes a state within a state, a technocracy that lives in an ultra-conservative world apart, with its followers who remain faithful to business from cradle to grave.

In a country where virtually is no taxes, eighty percent of state revenue came from oil. In 1983, when the financial crisis in Mexico scares international banks, finally they cash up (politicians had completely lost control): Venezuela has a debt of 30 thousand million dollars, after it got more money in a decade than in all its previous history. For the first time the economic folly is certified. But it is not enough to reverse course.

They must reach social explosion, which arrives on time on February 27, 1989, the black day of Venezuelan democracy, the point of no return of a political system rotten to the core. Carlos Andres Perez had just won the presidential election for the second time, promising the impossible, ie, the throwback to "Saudi Venezuela." An unscrupulous demagoguery:

Perez had already accepted the horse care imposed by the IMF, and newly installed as president he dropped the monetary ax: free prices of fuel, disproportionate transport increase, cuts in social spending.

While capital continues to quietly leave the country (now Venezuelans held abroad, in different forms, 140 thousand million dollars), merchants stocked consumer goods, especially food, to make money on rising prices at the time of inevitable devaluation of the bolivar, the national currency. These combined factors (people were at the end of the month without money and without food) led to the indiscriminate looting of Caracas. Authentic bread riots: the exasperated poor people descended from barrios on the hills to take everything they could.

On the third day of anarchy, there was the slaughter: the army took to the streets and entered in the barrios, shooting without mercy on people (thieves, criminals, illegal immigrants, the poor bums). There were 246 official deaths, at least three thousand in reality, a massacre disguised as *limpieza social* (make a clean sweep of the most troublesome people).

President Perez ends his political career a few years later convicted of bribery.

In this historical context, the figure of Hugo Chavez Frias emerges. Born in 1954, very humble origins, a lieutenant colonel in the paratroopers, great baseball player, Hugo Chavez decided it was time to do away with the political system.

He identifies himself with Bolivar, because he believes in the alliance of people and army, believes in honesty, in the redemption of national sovereignty, social justice.

He prepares with other officers a coup in February 1992. The coup fails miserably, but Chavez is guaranteed a huge popularity, assuming full responsibility of the facts and accepting the prison (in Venezuela, nobody does) and as a prophet declares: "I shall return".

After five years in prison, pardoned by former President Caldera, elected as a "last white hope" in 1992, Chavez decided to abandon the insurrection path to devote himself to politics. The electorate does not want the old parties, so that the most popular candidate for president at this moment is a former Miss Universe Irene Saez. And when the Democrats side with her, people just disappear: Irene is also part of the system, Chavez remains.

A man of courage against those who rule (political parties, employers, trade unions, oil technocracy, Catholic Church). Hugo Chavez wins for this, and because he is the only one who can speak to the poor people. He is certainly a populist, but he is sincere, because he is a true man of people, a *Zambo* (half black half Indian) who has no intention to join the rich world, who talks like humble people, who handles the latest, for the first time in the history of Venezuela, with respect, even love. Still now he is able to stop the presidential car to hug an old, sweating and badly dressed woman.

Poor women fall in love with him, the most powerful man in Venezuela who handle them better than their husbands: "*Con hambre y desempleo, con Chavez me resteo* " ("with hunger and unemployment, I remain with Chavez").

Venezuela ruling classes are horrified by the man. It is also a question of aesthetics: the personal insults ("beggar", "monkey", "kitchen boy") are more significant than the political ones ("dictator", "communist", "accomplice of Fidel Castro", "partner of Colombian terrorists").

Because Chavez is a military man with clear authoritarian tendencies, but he always acts in accordance with the constitution (the first approved by universal suffrage, and with the total renovation of all elected positions) and he never allow the army to quell any kind of event .

Because he threatens a social revolution, but he actually lowers inflation with a restrictive expenditure policy, he does not change trade agreements with the U.S. (indeed he seems to have already sold to Americans natural gas reserves of Orinoco delta) he does not concrete a real tax reform, nor a real land reform, even if he triples contributions to public school and calls the army to settle some schools, to build soup kitchens for poor children, to restore some hospitals (the "Plan Bolivar 2000").

The truth is that Chavez lacks competence and political skills. He is wrongly handling the economy and he uses as useless as fool *barricadero* tones. He is becoming embroiled in the excess of powers that the new constitution guarantees and his military friends placed wherever do not seem to rise to the occasion.

But the truth is, above all, that most opposition is class system supporter bordering on racism (because the darker your skin is, the more you go down in the social ladder), it tried in every way the coup, with the explicit support of the Catholic Church, which refuses to lose its privileges.

The problem is that it tried the confrontation, in last year December, and it failed miserably. The main characters of the challenge to Chavez are also the biggest losers: the managers of PDVSA.

The pro-American technocrats (the former president Luis Giusti now works for Bush) of the state oil company initially sought privatization, to be safe as "foreigner at home", or they sought a solution by force (ie a military coup) to take strict control of the country, relying on an army-backed regime.

They thought that by blocking the production and distribution of the country and sabotaging facilities, would cause the end of Chavez in a week. Result: the army remained loyal to Chavez, people kept fighting, the action of the opposition miserably failed. In response, Chavez, stronger than ever, kicked 13 thousand employees including managers and supervisors, cleaning PDVSA by his enemies and getting rid of an excess of bureaucracy. A move like a perfect free-trader.

The army had already suffered a purge after the soft coup attempt led by the leader of *Fedecamaras* (the lobby of entrepreneurs) Carmona (who fled to Colombia).

The other leaders of the protest, ie the new president of the entrepreneurs and the leader of the largest Venezuelan trade union (which represents only 20 percent of workers, almost all state employees) are one under house arrest and the other refugees in Costa Rica. For the defeated opposition, these are tests of the dictatorship that Chavez is building inexorably. Now they put everything on the recall referendum, an institution of the new constitution: spent half of office for each elected position, a number of voters may request a referendum to confirm whether or not the elected person. But they argue that Chavez will never accept losing power through electoral means.

For its part, Chavez accused the opposition of being indiscriminately fascist, he calls everyday people to oppose by force the end of "Bolivarian revolution".

In short, both parties use tones of civil war, and the media are disgraceful in this regard.

Now, with a literally split society, where 60 percent of employees earns minimum wage (one hundred U.S. dollars a month), where illegal workers and unemployed are nearly 70 percent of the workforce, where the social imbalance assumes the character of the crime, with a shocking level of violence (a hundred deaths every weekend in *barrios*), increasing the level of conflict is like lighting the fuse on a powder keg.

But there is a hope: the advent of Chavez, for better or for worse, gave a huge shock to the country, he made a whole people talk about constitutional rights, he considered excluded citizens, he led a indifferent average class to the streets, to discuss politics.

The Army has accepted two months of chaos without a shot being fired. All the power of television showed its uselessness in a historically TV-addicted country. All forms of what Munoz called *liderazgo vertical* (vertical command) are called into question. Venezuela, with all its enormous tensions, could also be a laboratory of the future. Perhaps he is right when Eduardo Galeano writes that "... in human history every act of destruction has its answer, soon or later, in an act of creation".

**Cesare Sangalli**