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The Venezuelan Political Culture and its Incompatibility with the Rule of Law

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Since February this year, Venezuela has been in an extreme state of upheaval. Even for a country like Venezuela with extreme polarization and lively political debate, riots of this magnitude are uncommon.

What started as a demonstration by a group of students in the south-west of the country claiming for more security at universities, has transformed into the worst political violence the country has experienced in more than twenty years.

The extreme repression the Government has used to neutralize the demonstrations has boosted the protesters anger and attracted more people to the streets. The anger produced by the repression has coupled with the resentment caused by social problems and economic austerity the country is facing. As a result of bad policies during more than a decade, Venezuela is suffering from many economic difficulties such as one of the highest inflation levels in the world (57%), scarcity of basic goods, and a crisis on the national electric system, just to mention some. Moreover, the country has been suffering from extremely high rates of criminality, making kidnappings, robberies and murders part of the daily live of citizens.

Since this wave of protests started more than 2000 protesters have been detained, more than 50 people have reported being tortured and almost 40 people have died in the demonstrations, some of them by the action of public security forces.[1] Likewise three political leaders of the opposition have been put behind bars because of their support for the riots and the right of protesters to remain in the streets.[2]

But despite the alarming statistics presented above, the international community has not pressured the Venezuelan Government to stop the repression and get back on the democratic track. In fact, multilateral organizations like MERCOSUR or the Organization of American States (OAS) have approved rather soft declarations calling involved groups to start political negotiation. Countries like Brazil, Uruguay and relevant regional figures including the General Secretary of the OAS have claimed that what is happening in Venezuela is not uncommon, so the international community should not intervene but offer

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platforms for dialogue and consensus.

Other nations like the United Kingdom or the United States have expressed their concerns with the actions taken by the Venezuelan Government, but their remarks have not progressed beyond words of condemnation.

The argument that in Latin-America political violence and tension is not uncommon is in fact true if we analyzed recent political events in the region. Latin-America is a region of constant political upheaval where riots and repression are not rare. In fact, during the last couple of years countries like Brazil and Chile have been involved in political violence and the action of security forces to control the demonstrations have been highly criticized.

But is the repression in other countries of the region of the same genus as that being witnessed in Venezuela?

I consider that the current repression we are witnessing in Venezuela is part of an ideological incompatibility of Venezuela's Socialist Government with democratic political institutions such as human rights, political plurality, separation of powers, and judiciary independence.

As I will explain, I believe that the proximity of former president Hugo Chavez with Fidel Castro perverted Venezuelan politics as a consequence of an influx of Soviet Marxist ideas.

Ethics in Soviet Marxism

Chavez's XXI Socialism, as a political ideology, has been indirectly formed with a deep influx of Soviet Marxist through the influence of Cuba and Fidel Castro.

The Soviet Union was built over an orthodox interpretation of Marxism. Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik revolution, has been recognized as a reputed Marxist thinker. The fight of the Bolsheviks was aimed to impose the Marxist Socialist society and destroy the capitalist State. Although the aim of the Soviets was to create an egalitarian society in order to protect workers from the domination of capitalists, the methods they used were cruel and vindictive. The development of the Bolshevik project into a totalitarian political system has its first explanation in the moral foundation of Marxist political theory.

It is not a coincidence that many Marxist political projects of the 20th century ended up as cruel totalitarian systems. The primary reason for this lies on the ambiguous ethical

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conception where Marxism stands. Indeed, while on the one hand Marxism endorses a relativist meta-ethical conception where there is no universal moral truth, on the other, it is also founded on a teleological view regarding the road to socialism.

Marx believed that there was no “eternal truth” regarding moral values.[3] Or in a nutshell, there is no moral truth out there for us to look for. That is because for Marx there is no essence in moral statements. For Marx moral standards are the product of a specific mode of production. Under the capitalist society moral standards will be different to those in a Socialist society because the two societies have different modes of production. Rather than a moral theory, Marxism attempts to be a scientific theory trying to explain economy, politics and human behavior. Therefore, any moral endeavor should be understood as a sociological endeavor.

Values, then, are socially created rules contingent on the material contexts where they find expression.[4] Under this meta-ethical view there can be as many moral codes as there are material contexts, but no one is better than the others.[5]

However, Marxism is not a simplistic relativist theory. The principle aim of Marxism is to explain the rise of Socialist society when the -certain- collapse of the capitalist system occurs. For Marx, capitalism brings alienation and poverty to the majority of the population, which will make the system collapse eventually.[6] Therefore, in Marxism there is a teleological view regarding the rise of the Socialist state. There might be some contradiction in these two ideas, for further analysis, please see the footnote.[7] It will be enough to say that Marxism praises the virtues of Socialist society but offers no moral guidance on the road toward socialism.

This moral ambiguity of Marxism has been problematic when applied in practice because, in theory, any action is morally permissible if it take us closer to the Socialist society.

Bolsheviks took advantage of this moral ambiguity to impose totalitarian ethics on the political culture of the Soviet Union.[8] Indeed, the moral emptiness of Marxism allowed Bolsheviks to impose a totalitarian system where there were no moral boundaries in the construction of socialism.

Lenin, the Bolshevik leader in the first stages of the Soviet Union, who laid the foundations of Soviet Marxism, was convinced that a totalitarian approach to politics was the only possible

way to achieve socialism. In his book “The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky”, Lenin openly expressed his totalitarian view of Marxism. For Lenin, when Marx referred to the dictatorship of the proletariat he was referring to a system “based directly upon force and unrestricted by any laws”[9]. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat “is rule won and maintained by the use of violence against the bourgeoisie...” For Lenin the State –a political structure condemned to disappear- should be used to build a “democracy for the exploited and [as] a means of suppressing the exploiters”[10]

Lenin put all these theoretical conceptions into practice while he was the leader of the Soviet Union. During his time as the head of the USSR (1917-1920) Lenin imposed Marxist political theory through cruelty and violence, with no respect for human rights. On October 27th, not even forty eight hours after the October Revolution, Lenin signed a Decree on the Press, forbidding any commentary on newspaper against the Bolsheviks.[11]

Lenin thought -and he said as much in an article published in the Soviet newspapers Pravda and Izvestia on January 06 1918- that in the interest of the people, enemies of Socialism should be denied “for a time not only inviolability of the person, and not only freedom of the press, but universal suffrage...”. [12] In the new Constitution approved in 1918, the State centralized power away from local governments, voting rights were restricted for some social and political groups, and many civil and political rights were revoked from clerics and former members of the royal family.[13] In the June of the same year, Lenin reintroduced the death penalty and claimed that “[t]here has not been a single revolution, or era of civil war, without executions”. [14] Lenin also created in 1919 concentration camps for dealing with political prisoners, where they were forced to do manual work in deplorable working conditions. [15] The reason for all these measures was the necessity of achieving the Socialist state and stopping the bourgeois from obstructing that transit. Lenin was the sculptor of the new Soviet political culture. A political culture where the end justified the means, where a man ruled over society and where there was no place for dissent.

Alongside Lenin was Joseph Stalin, one of his more loyal disciples. Stalin learned from his master the methods to impose socialism. Stalin took control of the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin in 1924. Unlike other high ranking members of the party, Stalin was a real Leninist.[16] He wanted to impose the Leninist approach to Marxism and was ready to embrace the Soviet political system as it was legated by Lenin. For the duration of Stalin’s time as the head of the Soviet Union, all the political vices imposed by Lenin were taken to

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the extreme. Repression, centralism, ideological hegemony and a cult of personality all appeared in their most radical forms under Stalin. [17] Stalinism turned the Soviet Union into a land of mass terror where any dissent was suffocated with extreme brutality.

After his death in 1953, the leadership of the Soviet Union tried to break with Stalin's legacy, however, only modest changes were made in that regard.

The leaders of the Soviet Union were never interested in respecting the rule of law. Their interest was achieving a Socialist society. They were not willing to change because the Leninist vision of politics was too entrenched in the political culture of the country. In fact, more than twenty four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is still suffering from the legacy of that totalitarian system.[18]

The Soviet Union continuously attempted to spread their vision of Marxism around the world; in some instances successfully.

Cuba's embrace of Soviet Marxism

The political culture of the Soviet Union landed in Latin-America since the arrival of Fidel Castro into power in Cuba in 1959. For almost thirty years Cuba and the Soviet Union had very close political and economic relations.

Even though, at the beginning of his mandate, Castro reaffirmed many times that his revolution was not Marxist, it was not long before he opened the door of the island to the Soviet Union. As his relations with the United States started to deteriorate, Castro got closer to USSR in order to protect the national security of the island.[19] The cooling of the USA-Cuba relationship was used by Nikita Krushchev to reach the Cuban Government. This process started with an official visit of the Deputy Prime Minister Anastasia Mikoyan to the island in February 1960 that ended with the signing of many economic and commercial agreements.

In order to stop began to appear to be a new Communist protectorate of the Soviet Union in Latin America, the government of President Eisenhower declared an embargo to the island in October 1960.[20]After the failure Bay of Pigs operation in 1961, the Soviet Union agreed to offer the full protection of Cuba, including arms and military training.[21] This made Cuba extremely dependent on the USSR and pushed it closer to Marxist-Leninist ideas.

There was a symbiotic relation between the two countries. Cuba was guaranteed its national security and financial help to boost its weak economy; and the USSR, on the other hand, obtained a foothold with which to extend its influence in the region.

But in its relations with the Soviets, Cuba received something more than trade agreements and military protection. As part of the inter-change, Cuba was ideologically bombarded by the Soviet approach to Marxism and by its political culture, which was innately hostile to democratic institutions. Indeed, while there were some bumps in the relationship between Cuba and the Soviets during 1960s,[22] the links were so tight during the '70s that the island recognized its Marxist-Leninist foundation in its own Constitution, approved on 1976.[23] The Cuba-USSR pact remained strong until the collapse of the USSR at the end of the 80s.

By copying the Soviets, the Government of Cuba imposed a political system that made the idea of the rule of law legally and political impossible. First, in Cuba there is no judicial independence. The judicial branch –as well as the Public Prosecutors Office- is subject to the order of the State Council, which is directly controlled by the Head of Government. [24] Second, as in the Soviet Union, there is only one legalized Party in the Cuban political system. Third, the whole political system is steeped in a deep cult of personality, revolving around the Head of Government. Fourth, political and civil rights are seriously limited by criminal laws and the constitutional text, including a constitutional provision that expressly establishes that legal rights cannot be exercised in contradiction of the aims of a Socialist State.[25]

As demonstrated above, Cuba fully embraced the Soviet concept of Marxism, built upon ideas irreconcilables with human rights and the rule of law. After more than fifty years in power, political leaders of Cuba have not made any significant change to assure human rights and guarantee the rule of law. In fact, they tried to export their political vision many times in the region, though were defeated in most cases.

Fidel Castro and his anti-democratic influence in Venezuela

The arrival of Chavez to power in Venezuela was looked upon as a breath of fresh air for Cuban authorities. At the end of the '90s when Chavez swept to power in Venezuela, Cuba was politically isolated in the region. Unlike in other regions, Marxism was politically and military defeated in Latin America during the '70s and '80s.

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When Chavez took office in 1999, Cuba saw in the new Venezuelan Government a great opportunity to boost its economy – deeply affected after the collapse of the Soviet Union – and a new opportunity to expand its Marxism project in the region.

The Cuba-Venezuela relationship produced many agreements in a wide range of areas from economy to public policy. At the center of their bilateral relationship was the *Integral Agreement of Cooperation*, where Venezuela promised to send Cuba more than fifty thousand barrels of oil per day. In exchange Cuba compromised to send Venezuela talented public officials, in order to improve the functioning of some specific state agencies, including their intelligence agency, the Currency Exchange Control Commission, the National Office of Identification and Immigration, and the Armed Forces.[26]

To increase the cultural and political ties between the two countries, Venezuela sent to Cuba many members of the governing party and public servants to receive training in Marxism and Socialism. In the middle of the 2000s, Venezuela and Cuba worked so closely together that President Chavez said that the two nations were the same country under the same government.[27] Throughout this exchange, Cuba seized the opportunity to implant its Soviet-inspired political culture into the heart of Venezuela's political apparatus.

As Chavez became more aligned with Castro, Venezuelan political culture distanced itself from ideas like human rights, political pluralism or judicial independence. Chavismo went from promoting a very progressive Constitution that recognized human rights even when they were not included in legal norms in 1999[28]; to renouncing the American Convention on Human Rights in order to escape from the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court in 2013. Chavez systematically destroyed the democratic foundations of the Venezuelan political system.

Before Chavez came to power, Venezuela, whilst having much room for improvement, boasted a strong democratic system. Indeed twenty years ago Venezuela was a glowing example of human rights protection and respect for the rule of law for the whole region. Nowadays, however, stories of illegal detentions, restriction of freedom of expression, or torture are commonplace.

In Socialist Venezuela, judicial independence is nonexistent. Judges are suspended or put behind bars when they issue decisions not compatible with government policy. Take, for example, the case of Judge Maria Lourdes Afiuni who, after granting conditional liberty to an

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opponent of the Government, had to spend some time in jail simply because she delivered a judgment that was contrary to the Government's interests.

The situation of freedom of expression is worrisome as well. After applying heavy pressure on TV networks and radio stations over more than a decade, the Government has recently started to attack the press as well. The pressure of the Government against the media has resulted in the termination of one TV station's license, the forced sale of another TV station to new owners, and the closure of many radio stations. Now focusing its attacks against the press, the Government has set about restricting written media from importing paper for printing their editions. Moreover, after the beginning of the recent wave of protests, the Government decided to ban the transmission of a foreign TV station (NTN24 a Colombia based TV channel) on cable because of its disagreement on the coverage made of the political situation in Venezuela.

Likewise, illegal detentions are becoming more and more common in Venezuela. Besides the three political leaders detained for supporting the recent protests, Venezuela has a long list of people persecuted for political reasons. Many political, union and student leaders have been put behind bars with doubtful judicial procedures or forced into exile to avoid unjust legal prosecution.

It seems that the recent repression in Venezuela is a slip of the mask, revealing a sinister regime that is hostile to human rights and the rule of law.

As Cuba and the Soviet Union did in the past, Venezuela has tried to export its totalitarian political system to other countries. Using the money obtained from oil revenues, Venezuela has built influence over the political dynamics of countries such as Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Argentina. As happened to Venezuela before with the ideological transplant received from Cuba, there will be repercussions in the political cultures of all of these countries.

The continuity or cessation of the spread of pernicious political practices in the region will depend on the outcome of the Venezuelan crisis. That is why the international community must get involved in what is happening in Venezuela.

Conclusions

The influx of Soviet Marxist ideas that Cuba transferred to Venezuela have perverted the

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political culture of the country. This is not only problematic for the situation of human rights and the rule of law in the country but also for the democratic stability of Latin-America in general. Indeed, as the Soviet Union and Cuba did before, Venezuela has tried to spread its Socialist model to other countries in the region. The continuity on the spread of pernicious political practices in the region will depend on the outcome of the Venezuelan crisis. With the fate of a continent hanging in the balance, this crisis cannot be ignored by the rest of the World.

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[2] CBCnews.com “Venezuela jails 2 more opposition leaders” (20 March 2014), <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/venezuela-jails-2-more-opposition-leaders-1.2580726>

[3] Karl Marx “The Communist manifesto” (edited by Frederic L. Bender) (New York; London: Norton, 1988)

[4] James Gregor “Marxism, Fascism and Totalitarianism” (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), pg 22

[5] Kai Nielsen “Marxism and the Moral Point of View” (London: Westview Press, 1989), Pg 38

[6] Jonathan Wolff “Karl Marx” (*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) (Summer 2011 Edition), (Edward N. Zalta (ed.)), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/marx/>.

[7] See Kai Nielsen (n5); Jonathan Wolff (n6)

[8] James Gregor (n4)

[9] James Gregor (n4), pg 258

[10] James Gregor (n4), pg 258

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Gallately "Lenin, Stalin, Hitler: the age of social catastrophe" (New York: Vintage Books, 2008)

[12] Robert Gallately (n11) pg 49

[13] Robert Gallately (n11) pg 50-51

[14] Robert Gallately (n11) pg 51

[15] Robert Gallately (n11) pg 52

[16] Robert Gallately (n11) pg 156-159

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[18] Peter Pomerantsev "Russia a Post Modern Dictatorship?" (Legatum Institute), pg 5 <http://www.li.com/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2013-publications-russia-a-postmodern-dictatorship-24-october-2013.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

[19] Peter Sherman "The Soviet Union and Cuba" (London; New York; Andover: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) pg 7

[20] Peter Sherman (n19), pg 10

[21] Peter Sherman (n19), pg 10- 11)

[22] Mervin Bain "From Lenin to Castro" (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), chapter II

[23] Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, preamble, article 5 and article 39

[24] Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, article 90

[25] Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, article 62

[26] A cable revealed by Wikileaks, from the US embassy in Caracas analyzing the topic can be found on the following news report: El pais.com "Cable sobre cómo los servicios de inteligencia cubanos tienen acceso directo a Chávez" (30 November 2004),

http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2010/11/30/actualidad/1291071636_850215.html

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<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2007/12/23/internacional/1198384789.html>

[28] Constitution of Venezuela, article 22

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