

Chavez's Right Turn: State Realism versus International Solidarity

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Introduction

The radical “Bolivarian Socialist” government of Hugo Chavez has arrested a number of Colombian guerrilla leaders and a radical journalist with Swedish citizenship and handed them over to the right-wing regime of President Juan Manuel Santos, earning the Colombian government’s praise and gratitude. The close on-going collaboration between a leftist President with a regime with a notorious history of human rights violations, torture and disappearance of political prisoners has led to widespread protests among civil liberty advocates, leftists and populists throughout Latin America and Europe , while pleasing the Euro-American imperial establishment.

On April 26, 2011, Venezuelan immigration officials, relying exclusively on information from the Colombian secret police (DAS), arrested a naturalized Swedish citizen and journalist (Joaquin Perez Becerra) of Colombian descent, who had just arrived in the country. Based on Colombian secret police allegations that the Swedish citizen was a ‘FARC leader’, Perez was extradited to Colombia within 48 hours. Despite the fact that it was in violation of international diplomatic protocols and the Venezuelan constitution, this action had the personal backing of President Chavez. A month later, the Venezuelan armed forces joined their Colombian counterparts and captured a leader of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Guillermo Torres (with the nom de Guerra Julian Conrado) who is awaiting extradition to Colombia in a Venezuelan prison without access to an attorney. On March 17, Venezuelan Military Intelligence (DIM) detained two alleged guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN), Carlos Tirado and Carlos Perez, and turned them over to the Colombian secret police.

The new public face of Chavez as a partner of the repressive Colombian regime is not so new after all. On December 13, 2004, Rodrigo Granda, an international spokesperson for the FARC, and a naturalized Venezuelan citizen, whose family resided in Caracas, was snatched by plain-clothes Venezuelan intelligence agents in downtown Caracas where he had been participating in an international conference and secretly taken to Colombia with the ‘approval’ of the Venezuelan Ambassador in Bogota. Following several weeks of international protest, including from many conference participants, President Chavez issued a statement describing the ‘kidnapping’ as a violation of Venezuelan sovereignty and threatened to break relations with Colombia . In more recent times, Venezuela has stepped up the extradition of revolutionary political opponents of Colombia ’s narco-regime: In the first five months of 2009, Venezuela extradited 15 alleged members of the ELN and in November 2010, a FARC militant and two suspected members of the ELN were handed over to the Colombian police. In January 2011 Nilson Teran Ferreira, a suspected ELN leader, was

delivered to the Colombian military. The collaboration between Latin America's most notorious authoritarian rightwing regime and the supposedly most radical 'socialist' government raises important issues about the meaning of political identities and how they relate to domestic and international politics and more specifically what principles and interests guide state policies.

Revolutionary Solidarity and State Interests

The recent 'turn' in Venezuela politics, from expressing sympathy and even support for revolutionary struggles and movements in Latin America to its present collaboration with pro-imperial rightwing regimes, has numerous historical precedents. It may help to examine the contexts and circumstances of these collaborations:

The Bolshevik revolutionary government in Russia initially gave whole hearted support to revolutionary uprisings in Germany , Hungary , Finland and elsewhere. With the defeats of these revolts and the consolidation of the capitalist regimes, Russian state and economic interests took prime of place among the Bolshevik leaders. Trade and investment agreements, peace treaties and diplomatic recognition between Communist Russia and the Western capitalist states defined the new politics of "co-existence". With the rise of fascism, the Soviet Union under Stalin further subordinated communist policy in order to secure state-to-state alliances, first with the Western Allies and, failing that, with Nazi Germany. The Hitler-Stalin pact was conceived by the Soviets as a way to prevent a German invasion and to secure its borders from a sworn rightwing enemy. As part of Stalin's expression of good faith, he handed over to Hitler a number of leading exiled German communist leaders, who had sought asylum in Russia . Not surprisingly they were tortured and executed. This practice stopped only after Hitler invaded Russia and Stalin encouraged the now decimated ranks of German communists to re-join the 'anti-Nazi' underground resistance.

In the early 1970's, as Mao's China reconciled with Nixon's United States and broke with the Soviet Union, Chinese foreign policy shifted toward supporting US-backed counter-revolutionaries, including Holden Roberts in Angola and Pinochet in Chile. China denounced any leftist government and movement, which, however faintly, had ties with the USSR , and embraced their enemies, no matter how subservient they were to Euro-American imperial interests.

In Stalin's USSR and Mao's China , short-term 'state interests' trumped revolutionary solidarity. What were these 'state interests'?

In the case of the USSR , Stalin gambled that a 'peace pact' with Hitler's Germany would protect them from an imperialist Nazi invasion and partially end the encirclement of Russia . Stalin no longer trusted in the strength of international working class solidarity to prevent war, especially in light of a series of revolutionary defeats and the generalized retreat of the Left over the previous decades (Germany, Spain, Hungary and Finland) .The advance of fascism and the extreme right, unremitting Western hostility toward the USSR and the Western European policy of appeasing Hitler, convinced Stalin to seek his own peace pact with Germany. In order to demonstrate their 'sincerity' toward its new 'peace partner', the USSR downplayed their criticism of the Nazis, urging Communist parties around the world to focus on attacking the West rather than Hitler's Germany, and gave into Hitler's demand to extradite German Communist "terrorists" who had found asylum in the Soviet Union.

Stalin's pursuit of short term 'state interests' via pacts with the "far right" ended in a

strategic catastrophe: Nazi Germany was free to first conquer Western Europe and then turned its guns on Russia, invading an unprepared USSR and occupying half the country. In the meantime the international anti-fascist solidarity movements had been weakened and temporarily disoriented by the zigzags of Stalin's policies.

In the mid-1970's, the Peoples Republic of China 's 'reconciliation' with the US , led to a turn in international policy: ' US imperialism' became an ally against the greater evil 'Soviet social imperialism'. As a result China , under Chairman Mao Tse Tung, urged its international supporters to denounce progressive regimes receiving Soviet aid (Cuba , Vietnam , Angola , etc.) and it withdrew its support for revolutionary armed resistance against pro-US client states in Southeast Asia . China 's 'pact' with Washington was to secure immediate 'state interests': Diplomatic recognition and the end of the trade embargo. Mao's short-term commercial and diplomatic gains were secured by sacrificing the more fundamental strategic goals of furthering socialist values at home and revolution abroad.

As a result, China lost its credibility among Third World revolutionaries and anti-imperialists, in exchange for gaining the good graces of the White House and greater access to the capitalist world market. Short-term "pragmatism' led to long-term transformation: The Peoples Republic of China became a dynamic emerging capitalist power, with some of the greatest social inequalities in Asia and perhaps the world.

Venezuela: State Interests versus International Solidarity

The rise of radical politics in Venezuela , which is the cause and consequence of the election of President Chavez(1999), coincided with the rise of revolutionary social movements throughout Latin America from the late 1990's to the middle of the first decade of the 21st century (1995-2005). Neo-liberal regimes were toppled in Ecuador , Bolivia and Argentina ; mass social movements challenging neo-liberal orthodoxy took hold everywhere; the Colombian guerrilla movements were advancing toward the major cities; and center-left politicians were elected to power in Brazil , Argentina , Bolivia , Paraguay , Ecuador and Uruguay . The US economic crises undermined the credibility of Washington 's 'free trade' agenda. The increasing Asian demand for raw materials stimulated an economy boom in Latin America , which funded social programs and nationalizations.

In the case of Venezuela , a failed US-backed military coup and 'bosses' boycott' in 2002-2003, forced the Chavez government to rely on the masses and turn to the Left. Chavez proceeded to "re-nationalize" petroleum and related industries and articulate a "Bolivarian Socialist" ideology.

Chavez' radicalization found a favorable climate in Latin America and the bountiful revenues from the rising price of oil financed his social programs. Chavez maintained a plural position of embracing governing center-left governments, backing radical social movements and supporting the Colombian guerrillas' proposals for a negotiated settlement. Chavez called for the recognition of Colombia 's guerrillas as legitimate 'belligerents" not "terrorists'.

Venezuela 's foreign policy was geared toward isolating its main threat emanating from Washington by promoting exclusively Latin American/Caribbean organizations, strengthening regional trade and investment links and securing regional allies in opposition to US intervention, military pacts, bases and US-backed military coups.

In response to US financing of Venezuelan opposition groups (electoral and extra

parliamentary), Chavez has provided moral and political support to anti-imperialist groups throughout Latin America . After Israel and American Zionists began attacking Venezuela , Chavez extended his support to the Palestinians and broadened ties with Iran and other Arab anti-imperialist movements and regimes. Above all, Chavez strengthened his political and economic ties with Cuba , consulting with the Cuban leadership, to form a radical axis of opposition to imperialism. Washington 's effort to strangle the Cuban revolution by an economic embargo was effectively undermined by Chavez' large-scale, long-term economic agreements with Havana .

Up until the later part of this decade, Venezuela's foreign policy - its 'state interests' - coincided with the interests of the left regimes and social movements throughout Latin America. Chavez clashed diplomatically with Washington 's client states in the hemisphere, especially Colombia , headed by narco-death squad President Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010). However recent years have witnessed several external and internal changes and a gradual shift toward the center.

The revolutionary upsurge in Latin America began to ebb: The mass upheavals led to the rise of center-left regimes, which, in turn, demobilized the radical movements and adopted strategies relying on agro-mineral export strategies, all the while pursuing autonomous foreign policies independent of US-control. The Colombian guerrilla movements were in retreat and on the defensive - their capacity to buffer Venezuela from a hostile Colombian client regime waned. Chavez adapted to these 'new realities', becoming an uncritical supporter of the 'social liberal' regimes of Lula in Brazil, Morales in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador, Vazquez in Uruguay and Bachelet in Chile. Chavez increasingly chose immediate diplomatic support from the existing regimes over any long-term support, which might have resulted from a revival of the mass movements. Trade ties with Brazil and Argentina and diplomatic support from its fellow Latin American states against an increasingly aggressive US became central to Venezuela 's foreign policy: The basis of Venezuelan policy was no longer the internal politics of the center-left and centrist regimes but their degree of support for an independent foreign policy.

Repeated US interventions failed to generate a successful coup or to secure any electoral victories, against Chavez. As a result Washington increasingly turned to using external threats against Chavez via its Colombian client state, the recipient of \$5 billion in military aid. Colombia 's military build-up, its border crossings and infiltration of death squads into Venezuela , forced Chavez into a large-scale purchase of Russian arms and toward the formation of a regional alliance (ALBA).

The US-backed military coup in Honduras precipitated a major rethink in Venezuela 's policy. The coup had ousted a democratically elected centrist liberal, President Zelaya in Honduras , a member of ALBA and set up a repressive regime subservient to the White House. However, the coup had the effect of isolating the US throughout Latin America -not a single government supported the new regime in Tegucigalpa . Even the neo-liberal regimes of Colombia , Mexico , Peru and Panama voted to expel Honduras from the Organization of American States. On the one hand, Venezuela viewed this 'unity' of the right and center-left as an opportunity toward mending fences with the conservative regimes; and on the other, it understood that the Obama Administration was ready to use the 'military option' to regain its dominance.

The fear of a US military intervention was greatly heightened by the Obama-Uribe agreement establishing seven US strategic military bases near its border with Venezuela .

Chavez wavered in his response to this immediate threat: At one point he almost broke trade and diplomatic relations with Colombia, only to immediately reconcile with Uribe, although the latter had demonstrated no desire to sign on to a pact of co-existence.

Meanwhile, the 2010 Congressional elections in Venezuela led to a major increase in electoral support for the US-backed right (approximately 50%) and their greater representation in Congress (40%). While the Right increased their support inside Venezuela, the Left in Colombia, both the guerrillas and the electoral opposition lost ground. Chavez could not count on any immediate counter-weight to a military provocation.

Chavez faced several options: The first was to return to the earlier policy of international solidarity with radical movements; the second was to continue working with the center-left regimes while maintaining strong criticism and firm opposition to the US backed neo-liberal regimes; and the third option was to turn toward the Right, more specifically to seek rapprochement with the newly elected President of Colombia, Santos and sign a broad political, military and economic agreement where Venezuela agreed to collaborate in eliminating Colombia's leftist adversaries in exchange for promises of 'non-aggression' (Colombia limiting its cross-border narco and military incursions).

Venezuela and Chavez decided that the FARC was a liability and that support from the radical Colombian mass social movements was not as important as closer diplomatic relations with President Santos. Chavez has calculated that complying with Santos political demands would provide greater security to the Venezuelan state than relying on the support of the international solidarity movements and his own radical domestic allies among the trade unions and intellectuals.

In line with this Right turn, the Chavez regime fulfilled Santos' requests - arresting FARC/ELN guerrillas, as well as a prominent leftist journalist, and extraditing them to a state which has had the worst human rights record in the Americas for over two decades, in terms of torture and extra-judicial assassinations. This Right turn acquires an even more ominous character when one considers that Colombia holds over 7600 political prisoners, over 7000 of whom are trade unionists, peasants, Indians, students, in other words non-combatants. In acquiescing to Santos requests, Venezuela did not even follow the established protocols of most democratic governments: It did not demand any guarantees against torture and respect for due process. Moreover, when critics have pointed out that these summary extraditions violated Venezuela's own constitutional procedures, Chavez launched a vicious campaign slandering his critics as agents of imperialism engaged in a plot to destabilize his regime.

Chavez's newfound ally on the Right, President Santos has not reciprocated: Colombia still maintains close military ties with Venezuela's prime enemy in Washington. Indeed, Santos vigorously sticks to the White House agenda: He successfully pressured Chavez to recognize the illegitimate regime of Lobos in Honduras- the product of a US-backed coup in exchange for the return of ousted ex-President Zelaya. Chavez did what no other center-left Latin American President has dared to do: He promised to support the reinstatement of the illegitimate Honduran regime into the OAS. On the basis of the Chavez-Santos agreement, Latin American opposition to Lobos collapsed and Washington's strategic goal was realized: A puppet regime was legitimized.

Chavez agreement with Santos to recognize the murderous Lobos regime betrayed the heroic struggle of the Honduran mass movement. Not one of the Honduran officials

responsible for over a hundred murders and disappearances of peasant leaders, journalists, human rights and pro-democracy activists are subject to any judicial investigation. Chavez has given his blessings to impunity and the continuation of an entire repressive apparatus, backed by the Honduran oligarchy and the US Pentagon.

In other words, to demonstrate his willingness to uphold his 'friendship and peace pact' with Santos , Chavez was willing to sacrifice the struggle of one of the most promising and courageous pro-democracy movements in the Americas .

And what does Chavez seek in his accommodation with the Right?

Security? Chavez has received only verbal 'promises', and some expressions of gratitude from Santos . But the enormous pro-US military command and US mission remain in place. In other words, there will be no dismantling of the Colombian para-military-military forces massed along the Venezuelan border and the US military base agreements, which threaten Venezuelan national security, will not change.

According to Venezuelan diplomats, Chavez' tactic is to 'win over' Santos from US tutelage. By befriending Santos , Chavez hopes that Bogota will not join in any joint military operation with the US or cooperate in future propaganda-destabilization campaigns. In the brief time since the Santos-Chavez pact was made, an emboldened Washington announced an embargo on the Venezuelan state oil company with the support of the Venezuelan congressional opposition. Santos , for his part, has not complied with the embargo, but then not a single country in the world has followed Washington 's lead. Clearly, President Santos is not likely to endanger the annual \$10 billion dollar trade between Colombia and Venezuela in order to humor the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's diplomatic caprices.

Conclusion

In contrast to Chavez policy of handing over leftist and guerrilla exiles to a rightist authoritarian regime, President Allende of Chile (1970-73) joined a delegation that welcomed armed fighters fleeing persecution in Bolivia and Argentina and offered them asylum. For many years, especially in the 1980's, Mexico , under center-right regimes, openly recognized the rights of asylum for guerrilla and leftist refugees from Central America - El Salvador and Guatemala . Revolutionary Cuba , for decades, offered asylum and medical treatment to leftist and guerrilla refugees from Latin American dictatorships and rejected demands for their extradition. Even as late as 2006, when the Cuban government was pursuing friendly relations with Colombia and when its then Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque expressed his deep reservations regarding the FARC in conversations with the author, Cuba refused to extradite guerrillas to their home countries where they would be tortured and abused. One day before he left office in 2011, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva denied Italy 's request to extradite Cesare Battisti, a former Italian guerrilla. As one Brazilian judge said -and Chavez should have listened: "At stake here is national sovereignty. It is as simple as that".

No one would criticize Chavez efforts to lessen border tensions by developing better diplomatic relations with Colombia and to expand trade and investment flows between the two countries. What is unacceptable is to describe the murderous Colombian regime as a "friend" of the Venezuela people and a partner in peace and democracy, while thousands of pro-democracy political prisoners rot in TB-infested Colombian prisons for years on trumped-up charges. Under Santos , civilian activists continue to be murdered almost every day. The

most recent killing was yesterday (June 9,2011): Ana Fabricia Cordoba, a leader of community-based displaced peasants, was murdered by the Colombian armed forces. Chavez' embrace of the Santos narco-presidency goes beyond the requirements for maintaining proper diplomatic and trade relations. His collaboration with the Colombian intelligence, military and secret police agencies in hunting down and deporting Leftists (without due process!) smacks of complicity in dictatorial repression and serves to alienate the most consequential supporters of the Bolivarian transformation in Venezuela .

Chavez' role in legitimizing of the Honduran coup-regime, without any consideration for the popular movements' demands for justice , is a clear capitulation to the Santos - Obama agenda. This line of action places Venezuela 's 'state' interests over the rights of the popular mass movements in Honduras . Chavez' collaboration with Santos on policing leftists and undermining popular struggles in Honduras raises serious questions about Venezuela 's claims of revolutionary solidarity. It certainly sows deep distrust about Chavez future relations with popular movements who might be engaged in struggle with one of Chavez's center-right diplomatic and economic partners.

What is particularly troubling is that most democratic and even center-left regimes do not sacrifice the mass social movements on the altar of "security" when they normalize relations with an adversary. Certainly the Right, especially the US , protects its former clients, allies, exiled right-wing oligarch and even admitted terrorists from extradition requests issued by Venezuela , Cuba and Argentina . Mass murders and bombers of civilian airplanes manage to live comfortably in Florida . Why Venezuela submits to the Right-wing demands of the Colombians, while complaining about the US protecting terrorists guilty of crimes in Venezuela , can only be explained by Chavez ideological shift to the Right, making Venezuela more vulnerable to pressure for greater concessions in the future.

Chavez is no longer interested in the support from the radical left: His definition of state policy revolves around securing the 'stability' of Bolivarian socialism in one country, even if it means sacrificing Colombian militants to a police state and pro-democracy movements in Honduras to an illegitimate US-imposed regime.

History provides mixed lessons. Stalin's deals with Hitler were a strategic disaster for the Soviet people: Once the Fascists got what they wanted they turned around and invaded Russia . Chavez has so far not received any 'reciprocal' confidence-building concession from Santos military machine. Even in terms of narrowly defined 'state interests', he has sacrificed loyal allies for empty promises. The US imperial state is Santos primary ally and military provider. China sacrificed international solidarity for a pact with the US , a policy that led to unregulated capitalist exploitation and deep social in justice s.

When and if the next confrontation between the US and Venezuela occurs, will Chavez, at least, be able to count on the "neutrality" of Colombia ? If past and present relations are any indication, Colombia will side with its client-master, mega-benefactor and ideological mentor. When a new rupture occurs, can Chavez count on the support of the militants, who have been jailed, the mass popular movements he pushed aside and the international movements and intellectuals he has slandered? As the US moves toward new confrontations with Venezuela and intensifies its economic sanctions, domestic and international solidarity will be vital for Venezuela 's defense. Who will stand up for the Bolivarian revolution, the Santos and Lobos of this "realist world"? or the solidarity movements in the streets of Caracas and the Americas ?

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