

President Chavez and the FARC: State and Revolution

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When President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela called on the FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, to end their armed struggle and declared the 'guerrilla war is history', he was following a path taken by many revolutionary leaders in the past.

As far back as the early 1920's, Lenin urged the nascent Turkish communist to sacrifice their revolutionary independence and to support Attaturk; his successor, Joseph Stalin encouraged the Chinese communists to subordinate their revolutionary movement to the nationalist party led by Chiang Kai Chek. Mao Tse Tung prioritized coalitions in which the Communist Party of Indonesia submitted to the leadership of the nationalist leader General Sukarno.

During the French-Indochinese Peace Agreements in Geneva in 1954, Ho Chi Minh agreed to the division of the country and urged the South Vietnamese communists to end the guerrilla war and work to re-unify the country through electoral means. During the new millennium Fidel Castro stated that 'armed struggle' was a thing of the past and that, under present conditions, new forms of political struggle were at the top of the agenda.

Hugo Chavez frequently urged Brazilians leftists to support the social-liberal regime of President Lula da Silva despite his embrace of free market economics at the World Social Forum of 2002. He also called on Latin American social movements to support a number of pro-capitalist regimes in Latin America, despite their defense of foreign investment, bankers and agro-mineral exporters.

These experiences of revolutionary governments calling on their radical co-thinkers to collaborate with non-revolutionary regimes and to submit to their political constraints have generally had disastrous consequences: The Kuo Ming Tang of Chiang Kai Shek turned on the Communist Party and massacred the majority of its workers and drove it into the mountains of the interior. The aboveground, legal Indonesian Communists and their supporters and family members suffered anywhere from 500,000 to 1 million deaths when Sukarno was overthrown in a CIA coup. The South Vietnamese communists who attempted to participate in electoral politics were assassinated or jailed and eventually, their survivors were forced to revert to underground guerrilla struggle.

The reformist electoral regimes which came to power in Latin America have rescued capitalism from the crises of the 1990's, demobilized the Left and opened the door for the resurgence of the hard right throughout most of the continent.

In the case of Colombia, Venezuela's President Chavez apparently chose to ignore the FARC's earlier experience in attempting to shift from armed struggle to electoral politics.

Between 1984-89 thousands of FARC guerrillas disarmed and embraced the electoral struggle. They ran candidates, elected congressmen and women and were decimated by the death squads of the Colombian military, paramilitary and private armies of the oligarchy. Over 5,000 militants and leaders were murdered. What is especially striking is that Chavez urgings to join the electoral process takes place under Colombia's bloodiest and most brutal violator of human rights in recent history.

Why then do radical leaders who themselves led armed struggles, once in office, call on their revolutionary counterparts to abandon guerrilla warfare and engage in electoral processes which have such dubious prospects?

Several kinds of explanations have been put forth at different times to explain what appears to be a political 'U-turn'.

The Moral Explanation

Some critics of the 'U-turn' explain the shift to a 'moral degeneration' - the leaders become autocratic, bureaucratic and seek only to consolidate their rule in their own country. This is the common position adopted by the Left Opposition to Stalin's policies with regard to Russian policy toward the Chinese revolution. Defenders of the 'U-turn' in China claimed it resulted from a recognition of 'changing times' and 'objective opportunities' on a world scale, arguing that the emergence of the 'world-wide anti-colonial revolution in the aftermath of World War II created a symmetry of purpose between nationalists and communists, which would evolve over time to a non-capitalist state.

That these alliances were fragile, led to regime breakdown and to the emergence of right-wing 'strong men' regimes suggests that this line of argument was itself of limited duration. There were and still are numerous variations on these explanation for the political 'U-turns' but any structural-historical explanation must come to terms with the difference between a revolutionary movement in the process of coming to power and a revolutionary leadership holding state power.

In the latter case, the revolutionary state must deal with a generally hostile environment, military pressures and interventions, economic boycotts and diplomatic isolation from imperial states and their clients. In this context the revolutionary or radical regime has a continuum of policy choices to enhance its international position, ranging from outright support of overseas radical or opposition movements to attempts to demonstrate moderation, conciliation and accommodation to imperial concerns. Several factors influence the foreign policies of the revolutionary regime. They are likely to pursue a revolutionary policy if:

1. Revolutionary movements are on the upswing and show promise of early success, in either toppling pro-imperial clients or putting in place a progressive or sympathetic government.
2. The revolutionary regime has recently come to power and confronts an imminent military threat to its consolidation, facing an all or nothing situation.
3. The revolutionary regime faces a solid bloc of intransigent opposition led by imperial powers, which show no willingness to negotiate a modus vivendi and are not eager to make any compromises.

In contrast, revolutionary regimes are more likely to downplay or renounce links to

revolutionary movements overseas if:

1. There are definite opportunities to pursue diplomatic relations, market, trade and investment agreements with capitalist regimes;
2. The radical movements are on a downslide, losing support or being eclipsed by electoral parties, which promise recognition and improved relations.
3. Internal socio-economic changes within the revolutionary regime evolve toward an accommodation with emerging local or foreign private investors whose future growth is dependent on associating with overseas business elites and dissociation from radical anti-capitalist forces.

In practice, at different time and places, the two polar positions are combined, according to a series of attenuating circumstances. For example, the revolutionary regime may pursue an accommodating position with a large, potentially economically important capitalist regime, while continuing to support revolutionary movements in a smaller, less significant capitalist country

In other cases, the revolutionary regime may dissociate itself from revolutionary movements, in order to diversify its markets and trade and, at the same time, continue to adopt 'revolutionary rhetoric' for domestic consumption and to maintain the allegiance of overseas reformist movements.

Foreign policy, revolutionary or not, is the prerogative of the diplomatic corps, which tends to contain many professionals who have no revolutionary standing and who are holdovers from pre-revolutionary times. Their understanding of foreign policy is to draw on previous ties and relations with their counterparts in the capitalist countries and with the past business elites of their country. Hence, by and large, they are constantly in a 'negotiating mode', immune to the internal revolutionary dynamics and look to maximize the greatest number of diplomatic ties and minimize overseas linkages to revolutionary movements which compromise their day-to-day relations with their foreign counterparts.

Government and Party : Solidarity and 'Interests of State'

It is conceivable to envision a situation in which a revolutionary government pursues a moderate policy of accommodation, while the revolutionary party or parties/movements supporting the government expresses solidarity with overseas revolutionary parties and movements. This presumes that the state and party are mutually supportive but politically and organizationally independent. This dual approach is possible if the political party decides its policies through its own deliberative forums, in consultation with its membership and is not a 'transmission belt' of the state and its executive branch.

Unfortunately in the overwhelming number of cases, the party-state tend to merge, leaders of the party and mass social movements take positions in the government and the movements lose their autonomy and become mechanisms to implement state policy. Henceforth the diplomatic maneuvers of the Foreign Office, override the party/movement's principles of revolutionary solidarity, reducing the latter to inconsequential abstract rhetoric.

While the post-revolutionary state has the responsibility of ensuring the day-to-day security, employment and provision of necessities to its people and therefore must find ways of dealing with existing regimes as they find them, the revolutionary parties and movements have as one of their prime goals the deepening and extension of the revolutionary changes

embedded in their programs.

In other words, there is an inevitable tension between 'reasons of state' and the 'revolutionary program' of the mass movements. With the consolidation of the post-revolutionary state, the dominant tendency of the governing class is to stabilize external relations. This involves two related processes: to limit the revolutionary party to moral support of their overseas counterparts and to dissociate or disown any ties to overseas revolutionary movements. International radical and revolutionary rhetoric remains ritualized for anniversaries of historic victories, heroic revolutionary personalities, denunciations of immediate imperial aggressors; while on a day-to-day basis, all sorts of agreements with capitalist regimes are pursued. To the degree that capitalist countries reach diplomatic, economic and political agreements with revolutionary regimes, the latter recasts their new partners as 'progressive', part of a new wave of 'anti-imperialist' governments, or as adopting an 'independent' position. What is noteworthy of these new re-definitions of capitalist diplomatic/economic partners is that they are not based on any internal structural, class, property changes, nor even any break in relations with imperial countries. The change in political labeling occurs almost exclusively as a result of the country's foreign relations with the revolutionary regime.

Venezuela: The Paradox of Revolutionary Changes and Conservative Foreign Policy

The Chavez government follows a policy practiced by the great majority of previous revolutionary or radical leaders faced with hostile imperial powers - adopting radical socio-economic policies to weaken internal allies of empire while seeking diplomatic allies externally among reformist and even conservative capitalist regimes. Chavez has backed the neo-liberal Lula regime in Brazil (and urged the popular social movements to do likewise) even as the ex-trade union boss slashed public employee pensions, imposed an IMF stability pact and favored agro-mineral exporters over landless rural workers. Likewise Chavez financially backed the Kirchner regime in Argentina via the purchase of state bonds even as it refused to challenge the illicit privatization of the 1990's, maintained the socio-economic inequalities of the past, refused to grant legal recognition to the independent trade union confederation CTA. For Chavez, the key issue was Argentina's opposition to US intervention against Venezuela and opposition to US-promoted integration via ALCA.

Chavez' foreign policy toward Colombia, the principle US political and military ally in the region has alternated between 'reconciliation' and 'rejection' depending on the immediate threats to its sovereignty. The points of conflict revolve around several Colombian blatant interventions into Venezuela: In 2006, the Colombian military kidnapped a Venezuelan citizen of Colombian origin who was a FARC foreign affairs representative in downtown Caracas. Prior to that the Venezuelan military captured 130 Colombian armed paramilitary forces in Venezuela less than 100 kilometers from the capital. Following the kidnapping, Venezuela briefly suspended economic relations, but they were renewed shortly after a meeting following an amicable diplomatic meeting between Colombia's death squad President Uribe and Chavez. Subsequently in 2008, when Chavez attempted to broker a prisoner release and open peace negotiations between the FARC and the Uribe regime, the latter launched a murderous military attack on the FARC's lead negotiator operating out of Ecuador's frontier. In the face of Uribe's defense of his violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty in pursuit of the guerrillas, Chavez was forced to denounce Uribe and mobilize the Venezuelan armed forces and to raise the matter before the Organization of American States. Uribe launched a diplomatic offensive claiming a guerrilla computer, captured in the raid,

contained evidence of Chavez ties to the FARC. Subsequently Uribe and Chavez negotiated a temporary settlement on the basis of a half-hearted understanding that Uribe would refrain from future cross-border military attacks. In this context of high military threats and diplomatic tensions, Chavez chose to publicly denounce the FARC, put distance between his government and the revolutionary left and call for its unilateral disarmament to gain diplomatic favor from Colombia, Europe and North America. Clearly Chavez believed that appeasing Uribe would lessen threats to Venezuela's borders and lessen the chances that Colombia would grant the US use of its border territory as a launching base for an invasion.

Chavez' decision was deeply influence by the military and political weakening of the FARC over the previous 5 years, the advance of the Colombian military and the calculation that the effectiveness of the FARC as a counter-weight to Uribe was in decline. In this context, Chavez probably considered an immediate diplomatic détente with US-backed Colombia more important than any past solidarity or future tactical recovery of the FARC. In general terms, when revolutionary governments perceive or confront a situation of weakening or defeated revolutionary movements abroad and increasing political threats by imperial powers and their satellites, they are more likely to build diplomatic bridges to centrists or rightist regimes. In order to pursue diplomatic support, the most likely confidence-building measure is to sacrifice any identification with the radical left, including public repudiation of any extra-parliamentary initiatives.

Since the 1990's economic crises, Cuba has pursued close diplomatic and economic relations with all Latin American states (including Colombia) and has opposed all guerrilla movements and refrained from criticizing center-right regimes, except those which publicly attack Cuba, as happened with US clients such as ex-President Fox of Mexico and his former Foreign Minister, George Castaneda, a notorious mouthpiece of the CIA and Cuban exiles in Miami.

Conclusion

The dilemmas of revolutionary governments revolves around the problem of managing the state, which involves maximizing international economic and diplomatic relations to develop the economy and defending its security in an imperial world order, while living up to its revolutionary ideology and solidarity with popular movements in the capitalist world. The risks of solidarity are lessened when new leftist regimes come to power or popular movements are in the ascent. The risks are greater when the resurgent right is in ascendancy. The dilemma is especially acute because the revolutionary state and the revolutionary party are tightly integrated - and identified as such: The party is led by the President of the State and there is overlap at all levels between government office holders and the party and the latter's activities reflect the priorities of the government. In the case where there is no independent space between Party and State, diplomatic moves, necessary for everyday policy, undermine the possibility that the Party based in its internal deliberations and principles could act independently in support of their international counterparts. In contrast, the existence of an independent revolutionary party - supportive of the state but with its own internal life - could resolve the dilemma by making overseas class solidarity central to its 'foreign policy'. By rejecting the role of being a government foreign policy transmission belt, the revolutionary party would operate parallel to the state, conveying their opposition to imperialism and internal class enemies but independent in choosing overseas allies and tactics. Given the different composition of the foreign affairs bureaucracy and diplomatic corps and the radical mass base of a revolutionary party, such a separation of state and movements would reflect the class-political differences inherent

between a diplomatic corps developed under previous reactionary regimes and accustomed to conventional modes of operation and newly radicalized popular activists, tested in class struggle and accustomed to exchanging ideas in international forums with overseas revolutionaries.

The risks of diplomatic dependence on unreliable capitalist allies and even riskier fragile temporary accommodations need to be balanced with the gains from solidarity and support from reliable, principled class-based opposition mass parties and movements engaged in extra-parliamentary politics.

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