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LEFTIST MILITARISM: THE INFLUENCE OF VELASQUISM IN CHÁVEZ

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Introduction

Peru lived his own revolution in the sixties. In 1968, a group of army officers led by Juan Velasco Alvarado took the power in the Andean Country. The subsequent military regime lasted until 1975, when he was expelled by another officer: Francisco Morales Bermudez.² Velasco Alvarado's regime was not a conventional regime. The majority of Latin American military dictatorships were conservatives (except Cuba), but the Peruvian model was a left wing regimen.

In the 1970s, during the Velasquism, a very young Hugo Chávez visited Peru as a Venezuelan military man. He and his mates were invited by the Peruvian leader to celebrate the sixth centenary of the Battle of Ayacucho. In this trip, Chavez was amazed by Peru's political model. He was only 20 years old, but his experience marked his posterior way of understanding politics.³

Three decades separate the coming of both regimes. The historical and geographical context was not the same. Peru in the sixties was a country in slow growth and development but still poor and rural, while Venezuela in the nineties was a decadent country. A petro-state that had experimented an opulent period during the second half of the century, cut off by an economic and social crisis.

In this paper, we try to explain how the far influence of a Peruvian military of the seventies lasted in a young guy during two decades. We don't say that Chávez and Velasco Alvarado were identical (there are many differences between them), we only think that existed many aspects in common between them and it could be due to the experience of Chavez in Peru.

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² ZAPATA, A. (2015): "La vida política", in ZAPATA, A. (Coord.): Perú, La búsqueda de la democracia. Tomo 5. 1960/2010. Madrid; Editorial Taurus. Fundación Mapfre, 2015, pp. 49-63.

³ DIETERICH, H. (2007): "Los primeros pasos del presidente libertador", in DIETERICH, H. (Coord.): *Hugo Chávez: El destino superior de los pueblos latinoamericanos y el gran salto hacia delante*. Alcalá la Real; Alcalá Grupo Editorial, p. 52.



Militarism

Juan Velasco Alvarado and Hugo Chávez shared origin; both were born in rural areas: Piura and Barinas, respectively, but it isn't the unique similarity. Velasco Alvarado was a general of the Peruvian army. He has made his entire career inside of a military institution since the twenties decade. Chávez was a military officer too. He was formed in the Militar Academy of Venezuela in Caracas and his projection was known in all the military institutions.

Velasco Alvarado and Hugo Chávez shared a way to capture the power: the Putsch. The Peruvian officer got to power in 1968 (first days of October) in a *madrugonazo*. This coup d'état was propitiated by the win of aprismo and its leader, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre in the next elections in 1969. The military establishment had animadversion towards aprismo and Haya de la Torre and a group of officers took the power preventively.

Hugo Chávez had a tight relationship with Putsch too. He had created a group inside the armed forces called Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200. This group was opposed to the democratic governments of the IV Republic. In 1992, when he was a Lieutenant Coronel, led a coup against the unpopular government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (Acción Democrática). At this moment, the situation in Venezuela was very unstable: economic crisis, inflation, public riots and widespread corruption generated an unsustainable situation. Chávez putsch was failed, but the situation didn't improve and he could win the presidential election six years later, in 1998. The traditional party system broke, the president Pérez suffered an impeachment and other officers starred another putsch.

Both didn't respect the democratic mechanisms. They considered more important the revolutionary action than the way of taking the power. In this sense, Velasco Alvarado was a son of the Cold War in a deinstitutionalized country, but this is not the case of Hugo Chávez. In 1992, the Cold War had finished and military tonic was in decadence, at least in Latin America. Venezuela was a country in deep political and economical crisis but it was a country with a long democratic trajectory and its constitutional regime had survived since 1961.

Chávez and Velasco Alvarado despised the politicians (and their parties). They were presented as cleaners of the excesses of politicians and fought for a new refoundation of their Countries. They built a special role for the forced armies, inheritors of the fight against the historical enemies (real or mythical) and guarantors of the goodness of people. In Peruvian case, the military men were convinced that the democracy was an obstacle to the necessary reforms.⁴ In Venezuela, Chávez thought that the political parties had sunk the republic and it was inevitable a rescue to Independence War values.

Both Velasco Alvarado and Chávez were accompanied of a group of strange officers. We say that they are strange because they aren't conservative as usual; this clique (in both cases) was progressive and deeply nationalist and wants to build a revolution in their countries.

Populism

Both leaders weren't classical leftists. They weren't social democrats, socialists or communists. They identified themselves as revolutionaries and led two so-called revolutions: Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (GRFA), in Peru and Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela.

Their ideology and their political praxis could be defined as left populism, which is something difficult to define, but we think that we should try to define it for a better understanding of the phenomenon. In fact, "Populism has some problems as a concept: it is undefined, ambiguous, elastic. It has difficulties to adapt in other contexts; it has no empirical capacity and has a lot of enemies. Moreover, it has various strategies to define it."⁵ In summary, in order not to extend the theoretical debate, we think that populism must have the majority of these premises: 1) Disregard for institutions of representative

⁴ ZAPATA, A. (2015): "La vida política"... , p. 48

⁵ FREIDENBERG, F. (2007): *La tentación populista. Una vía al poder en América Latina*. Madrid; Editorial Síntesis, pp. 19-23.



democracy, 2) simplification of discourse: an indefinite “them against us”, 3) charismatic leadership, 4) criticism of traditional politics and its parties (and mass media), and 5) nationalist rhetoric. We also believe that each of these points can occur in different degrees, not always in the same form or intensity. In leftist cases, these characteristics should be accompanied by criticism to undefined dominant groups (oligarchy, caste, empire...), an incipient statist and economic policies of aggregate demand and public investment. The culpability of those undefined dominant groups (oligarchy in both cases) were unreachable. Every problem was the fault of those groups.

Chávez and Velasco Alvarado deeply hated the political parties. Hugo Chávez criticized the parties of IV Republic (Acción Democrática and Copei) and he considered the previous regime as corrupt and undemocratic. Velasco Alvarado despised some parties, mainly APRA (and his leader Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre), the most important masses party in Peru during the last century.

Velasco Alvarado was one of the most prominent leaders in the gold age of populism in Latin America. The regime was typically populist. They wanted to mobilize the middle and low classes, they obviated the parties in a direct communication between government and masses.⁶

In this sense, we think that he meets the most of the requirements. As a dictator, he didn't respect institutions, freedoms or parties and he had a nationalist rhetoric with a deeply statist policy of Import Substitution Importation. Moreover, his regime attacked the oligarchy, the political parties and the press.⁷ He created the SINAMOS (Sistema Nacional de Movilización Popular), an institution born to mobilize the people and replace the old parties.

Chávez, in his own words, has recognized the influence of Velasco Alvarado in his way of understanding the world:

“I started to look the generals Torrijos in Panama and Velasco Alvarado in Peru. (...) I went as a cadet to parade in Ayacucho, with military men of the entire continent. Velasco Alvarado was the Peruvian president, and in Peru I heard about the Peruvian National Revolution, and [could see] young military men enthusiastic and united with the natives, it was an experience that failed, but had different signs to Pinochet and the dictators of the Southern Cone”.⁸

Hugo Chávez, in part influenced by his travels, had a more intensive way of making policies in this sense (populism). He built PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unificado de Venezuela*) like a structure of political mobilization. Moreover, he transformed PDVSA (*Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.*) in a parallel mechanism of adherence to the group.⁹ In economy, he took advantage of the oil price (and public debt) and built a structure of clienteles. Their rhetoric was very offensive against his enemies (oligarchy, “*escuálidos*”, the opposition, United States and, temporarily some countries like México, Spain or Colombia). He and his nearest circle used policies and diplomacy against them, but insults affronts too.

Chávez brought a new wave of populism to Latin America with his charisma, his antipolitic discourse and his nationalist rhetoric. His example was followed (in different ways) by other actual leaders like Evo Morales, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner or Pablo Iglesias.

Protectionism

Velasco Alvarado, and then Chávez were deeply nationalist. Both said that they were starting a national revolution in all areas: social, political and economic. In this area, both relied on protectionism as the best way to protect the national economic activities.

Velasco Alvarado's regime participated in the regional tendency of create a national industry, in an attempt

⁶ BENAVENTE URBINA, A.; CIRINO, J. A. (2005): *La democracia defraudada. Populismo revolucionario en América Latina*. Buenos Aires; Editorial Grito Sagrado, p. 91.

⁷ MARTÍN SÁNCHEZ, J. (2002): *La Revolución Peruana: Ideología y práctica política de un gobierno militar, 1968-1975*. Sevilla; CSIC. Universidad de Sevilla; Diputación de Sevilla, p. 159.

⁸ DIETERICH, H. (2007): “Los primeros...”, pp. 52-54; LUIS LEÓN, A.D. (2015): *Chávez al poder. Génesis y formación del movimiento bolivariano*. Santa Cruz de Tenerife; Ediciones Idea, p. 53.

⁹ FONTAINE, G.; MEDRANO CAVIEDES, C. (2016): “How resource nationalism hinders development: the institutional roots of the economic recession in Venezuela”, in *Revista do Serviço Público*, Núm. 4, pp. 671-696



to reduce the dependence of foreign products. These policies were implemented with public companies, invest in infrastructures, high tariffs, subsidies, . . . At first, these policies were successful, but then, it only could be maintained because the country held it with debt emissions.

Chávez was even more protectionist than Velasco Alvarado. Maybe, it would be unfair this comparative. The Peruvian regime ended badly, but his model didn't bring to the country the devastation of the Venezuelan case. The Bolivarian regime was unpredictable. The oil profits of the first decade of our century were invested in diplomacy, not in productivity. Moreover, the regime drowned the private initiative and reduced foreign investment and imports. This explosive cocktail was the first step for the Venezuelan troubles of today.

Chávez policies have been unpredictable and changing. His sharp rhetoric attacked Venezuelan or external politics, but he attacked different economic agents too. This volatility created economic instability and the (inner and outer) invest abandoned Venezuela.

That decline was spiced with a policy we could call: "improvised protectionism". This method had political objectives. Compulsive nationalizations, expropriations retransmitted by mass media, an aggressive agrarian policy, . . . were undermining investors' expectations and destroying the country's economic capacity and the confidence in its economy. This policies affected oil industry but above all, they especially affected other activities linked to basic elements like agriculture, fishing or other activities closely linked with basic services.

Chávez did not help to build a stable economy in the Caribbean country. He and his "improvised protectionism" created the illusion of a return to wealth based in the oil revenues, but it was only temporary. The oil price collapsed and with it the substantial incomes. Behind of 100\$ barrel there was nothing, no productivity, no primary sector, only increasing debts. Definitely, Venezuela, a traditional Petro-State,¹⁰ destroyed his own productive apparatus and increased its dependence on oil industry and its exports.

At this point, it is honest to point out the differences between the classical protectionism of Velasco Alvarado and the improvised policies of Hugo Chávez mainly after his radicalization between 2002 and 2005. The similarities, qualitatively, exist but, quantitatively, the differences between them are large.

Anti-American

Velasco Alvarado and Chávez were notoriously anti-American. The context of both regimes were very different, Velasco Alvarado govern Peru during the Cold War, while Hugo Chávez was the leader of Venezuela in the XXI century, with a softer American foreign policy. Despite this, Chavez and Velasco showed their antipathies towards the giant of the north.

The Peruvian officer had policies that didn't favor the American investments. The problems with International Petroleum Company (IPC) were incessant during the government of his predecessor: Fernando Belaúnde Terry and was a very unpopular problem. The administration of Velasco Alvarado nationalized the IPC during the first days of his government and it generated a boost of popular approval.¹¹ Controversy with IPC lasted for a long time, the IPC nationalization was one of its main impulses, but also contributed to the regime fall. It was not the only anti-imperialist action of the government, Velasco Alvarado made nationalizations in the fishing and mining industries or in the banking sector too.

Moreover, during the Cold War, Velasco Alvarado government started a turn towards a model seemed to Nasserism. In this sense, he declared his regime as Non-Aligned Country, but *in fact* he had good relations with the socialist and soviet countries like China.

¹⁰ Petro-States are a particular kind of State whose main source of revenue comes from abroad through sales of oil, which represent at least 40% of total exports and 10% of GDP. These are States that are highly dependent on a resource that is expendable, capital-intensive, strategic, vulnerable to external variables and which can provide a high monopolistic income. In: HIDALGO TRENADO, M. (2007): *A Petro-State: Oil, politics and democracy in Venezuela*. Madrid; Working Paper 49/2007, Real Instituto Elcano, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ MARTÍN SÁNCHEZ, J. (2002): *La Revolución Peruana* . . . , pp. 152-156.



Hugo Chávez was the main rival of US in Latin America during the first decade of the XXI century. He and his mates faced US many times. Chávez repeatedly insulted and disparaged important American figures, including the President.¹² His aggressive rhetoric filled many pages of national and international newspaper.

In national key, he nationalized a lot of activities and companies, with local and/or foreign capital. Important companies of sectors such as oil (Exxon), electricity (AES) or communications (Verizon) suffered this process in his Venezuelan subsidiaries companies.

Out of Venezuelan frontiers, Chávez had aggressive anti-American policies too. Hugo Chávez destroyed US commercial initiatives for Latin America and he built with petrodollars an alternative model (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*) with his leftist partners: Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and other little Caribbean countries. He discredited the majority of foreign actions of US, mainly during the Bush administration and verbally attacked some friends of the country like Tony Blair, Álvaro Uribe or José María Aznar.¹³ During Obama administration the conflict continued but was mitigated by the least attention given by the democrat president.

Moreover, Chávez and his government had very good relations with declared and deeply enemies of US like Russia, Belarus, Iran or Cuba, and he rearmed Venezuela, in theory, to repel a hypothetical North American attack.

Cuba?

As a small appendix, we think that the relation between the regimes of Venezuela and Cuba are very important. Castro's regime is anomalous in the continent's usual dynamics and it has changed the relations between countries of America since 1959, when the *barbudos* came to the power in the island. The importance of Castroism goes beyond the limits of pure internal politics and the relations between Cuba and the United States of America.

Both had an approach to Castro regime in different times for Cuba. Velasco Alvarado coincided in an important part of the time with the government of Salvador Allende in Chile, the southern neighbour. The reality is that during the early seventies a leftist axis was built in the Andean region

Perú reboot his relations with Cuba during Velasco Alvarado government and the Cuban revolutionary visited the country in 1971. Castro was one of the main Non-Alignment Movement leader and generated certain attraction in Velasco Alvarado. The approach to Cuba reached its zenith with the acquisition of Soviet armament through this Caribbean country.¹⁴ The importance of this movement was not small, because Cuba was regionally isolated in the sixties.

Chavez took this situation beyond. His relation with Castro was very close and they built a personal friendship based in a similar political view. Castro blessed Chavez in 1994, when he was only a coup officer and Chávez gave him back his gesture when he was president. Chavez built a complex system of diplomacy and economic relations with his oil revenues that brought Cuba out of international isolation and economic hardship.

Chávez revitalized the image of Cuba in the world. In 1995, Castrism was practically an anachronism linked to the Cold War. Venezuelan movement, and Hugo Chávez like his leader, modified this idea in some countries. Moreover, Venezuelan petrodollars served to oxygenate an old regimen which had suffered the fall of the Soviet Union.

¹² Hugo Chávez insulted the United States of America government, companies and senior leaders in many times. The president Bush was defined as "the devil" in the United Nations, or as a "donkey" in a TV show. Moreover, Chávez identified The U.S.A in many occasions as an imperialist country and rejected its projects in Latin America.

¹³ LUIS LEÓN, A.D. (2016): "Las relaciones hispanovenezolanas durante el chavismo (1998-2013)", in *Historia Actual On-Line*, No. 40, pp. 49-51.

¹⁴ MARTÍN SÁNCHEZ, J. (2002): *La revolución Peruana...*, p. 96.



Conclusion

The relations between Peru and Venezuela had been complex, but unavoidable. The mutual influence was produced until today. The political experiences had generated political relations between the two countries that had maintained until the XXI century.¹⁵

Chávez recognized the influence of Velasco Alvarado in his policies and his way of understanding reality. It is true that there are huge differences between the two regimes but they do not preclude the existence of symbolic links. In this paper, we have tried to show some of them and how a youthful experience can modify or reinforce an ideology or a way of understanding politics.

In conclusion, the way of understanding the reality is very equal. Chávez and Velasco Alvarado had an important number of similarities in different grades. In this presentation, I tried to show the clearest ones. There was a certain incidence of Velasco Alvarado in Chávez but his personality and context were more complex and we don't asseverate the existence of a direct relation between his travel and these similarities, but we can affirm that the similarities exist and that both are among the few soldiers left that have existed in the region.

¹⁵ LUIS LEÓN, A. D. (2016): "Ollanta Humala y el chavismo en las elecciones peruanas de 2006", en *Cadernos PROLAM/USP*, vol. 15, num. 28, pp. 141-155.



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