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THE VENEZUELAN ARMED FORCES AND 
THE “CHAVISTA REVOLUTION”**

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The turbulent, protracted Venezuelan crisis, which in fundamental ways continues to intensify, could perhaps be better understood if we view it as the result of the unwillingness of a rentier society and its petro-state to undertake the reforms that might reverse a long, painful process of decay. The rentier nature of Venezuelan national life, characterized by the total disregard of the cultural relationship between hard work and well-being (Ball 1994, 31), as well as the key features of its petro-state—the “magical state” (Coronil 1997)—, have been discussed in detail elsewhere, and it does not seem necessary to repeat that analysis here (Karl 1994 and 1995). Suffice it to say that the Venezuelan democratic experiment between 1958 and 1998, gradually became especially vulnerable to the impact of three factors:

1) The bewildering ups and downs in the price of oil. When it went down, the petro-state, addicted as it is to an unceasing supply of money to spend, turned to foreign borrowing as an alternative source, soon aggravating its own fiscal condition. When the price went up, the country’s political leaders abandoned any intentions they might have had to introduce economic reforms that are unacceptable to a population spoiled by governmental paternalism as a way of life.

2) The essentially utilitarian nature of the political culture, the public’s weak normative commitment to democracy and the rule of law, and the resulting gap between the expectations fanned by an irresponsible political elite, and the actual performance of the petro-state (Romero 1997, 25-28).

3) The messianic-fundamentalist mentality (“Bolivarian Fundamentalism”) predominant within influential sectors of the Venezuelan military, an ideological-political factor that has played and still plays a crucial role in shaping the country’s recent political evolution.

(*) Ponencia dictada en la Universidad de Harvard.
The hour of reckoning for *puntofijista* democracy (thus called after the place—Caldera’s own home in Caracas—, where one of its foundational pacts was signed in 1958) came in 1989, when the recently inaugurated government, amidst expectations of a speedy return to the bonanza of the early 1970s, finally had to face up to the fact that the international banks were unwilling to go on footing the bill of the Venezuelan state’s wasteful ways and almost insane prodigality. It would be a mistake to think that the Pérez government, which tried to implement the economic “package” of pro-market reforms, did it because the President liked it and had become a convert to neoliberalism. The reforms were undertaken because there appeared to be no more options to tackle an economy in ruins. To undertake the reforms was an act of statesmanship, carried out by the wrong person, in highly unfavorable circumstances, considering the mood of the public at that time. Simply put, the people were not prepared to accept that the *rentier* “development model” had collapsed. They did not want to change it then, just as they do not want to change it now. And why should they? a large number of Venezuelans may reasonably ask, given that they believe there is nothing wrong with the *rentier* model itself, nothing that cannot be cured once corruption is eliminated, and petroleum wealth fairly distributed by the state, thus making them quite happy and prosperous again. (International Republican Institute and Consultores-21 1996, 50).

Pérez’s catastrophic failure signaled the end not only for pro-market reforms, but also for any real possibility that Venezuelan society could for an extended period of time be willing to realistically appraise the root causes of its impoverishment. It was now open season for seeking scapegoats. First came Caldera and his anti-corruption crusade, in 1993 and 1994. It is well known that corruption plays an unusually large role in most Venezuelans’ minds, for they cannot find an alternative explanation for the contradiction that, according to the prevailing myth, the country is “rich” but the vast majority of the population is poor. For nearly three years, Caldera attempted to restore the old system and make it work again: an impossible task no doubt. He was forced, as Pérez was before him, to realize that no matter how hard he tried, there was no way the *rentier*, oil-based “development model” could make the country prosper again as it apparently did for some time. That it would only deepen our dependency on a single commodity and make us even poorer. Too late, the Caldera government introduced a half-hearted program of reforms, the *Agenda Venezuela* of 1996-1997 that was, again, received by the public as no more than another act of betrayal by a corrupt
political elite. The door was open for the man who, this time, while perhaps not capable of making the country thrive again quickly, at least would wreak revenge on those who brought us to the sorry situation we now find ourselves in: Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez.

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It is easier to determine what has died in Venezuela over the past three years, than to ascertain what exactly is being born. Our forty-year old, oil-financed democracy of pacts between elites is dead, certainly, but there are plenty of contrasting views as to what is replacing it. I shall argue later that what we are witnessing is the transition from one type of flawed democracy to an even more perverted one, to an increasingly plebiscitary and militarized regime that in some relevant aspects is—and looks like—a degraded version of puntofijismo. But before considering the “Chavista revolution” in more detail, it could prove useful to place the Venezuelan situation within the wider Latin American context.

It has become customary, when discussing democracy in Latin America today, to refer to our political regimes as “hybrid”, “exclusionary”, “authoritarian”, “frozen”, “tutelary”, “crisis-prone”, and other such adjectives. Do these qualifications tell us anything that we did not already know about the realities of democracy in several of our countries? I do not think so. The fact is that not much is new as far as the quality of democratic existence in Latin America in general, and Venezuela in particular, is concerned. There is usually a lack of historical perspective in the prevailing emphasis on the “hybrid” nature of political regimes in the region, where a number of countries may be accurately characterized as semi-democratic, rather than fully democratic, “because of constraints on constitutionalism, contestation or inclusiveness, including outright electoral fraud and manipulation” (Hartlyn and Valenzuela 1994, 106). Some of our democracies are indeed flawed and perverted, and probably becoming more so under the pressures exerted on most countries in the region—including Venezuela—to achieve a more competitive insertion in the world economy (Romero 1996b, 84–86). As John Sheahan puts it, the citizens in the U.S. and other advanced Western democracies “can under normal conditions take for granted that their own structure of protection for personal freedoms is firmly established. That assumption is not valid in Latin America” (Sheahan 1986, 184). It is not valid now, it has not been valid in the past—with very few exceptions—,
and it may be considered at least doubtful whether it will become valid in
the near future.

I would not want to argue that there is nothing new in what has been
happening, both politically and socioeconomically, in Latin America over
the past fifteen years or so. Some of the changes, however, are not so much
a question of substance as of degree. Look at the pro-market economic
reforms, for example. They have been common currency throughout the
region for decades. What is new is the intensity of the pressures on Latin
American nations to open and modernize their economies accepting the
realities of globalization. Until the early 1980s (in the Venezuelan case,
until the end of the decade) a few Latin American countries were able to
minimize the impact of painful reforms through borrowing. In the changed
international environment, however, these countries have been forced to
choose from only stabilization and structural adjustment, along the lines of
the “Washington consensus” (Conway 1995, 156).

Will the economic reforms now underway in some Latin American countries
lead to prosperity and freedom? My view of the matter is that the need to
undertake fundamental economic reforms, to modernize our economies and
make them more productive and competitive is an unavoidable reality for
the region; nevertheless, most emphatically, we must be aware not only of
the demands and costs, but also of the opportunities of globalization. There
is, however, no escaping the realization that the democratic regimes charged
with the task of reform keep finding significant obstacles along the way.
The impact of market forces on traditionally closed societies can be highly
destabilizing, creating competitive pressures on paternalistic states and
protected economies. Venezuela, for instance, has lived for decades under
the shadow of economic statism and political populism, and the country’s
inhabitants have grown accustomed to the comfortable subsidy of an
overvalued currency. But the current transformation of the world economy
into a dynamically integrated system could bypass entire countries or large
parts of their populations, shifting them “from a structural position of
exploitation to a structural position of irrelevance” (Castells 1993, 37).

The inability of a number of countries to respond successfully to the
challenges of globalization is leading to a variety of collective reactions,
with great disruptive potential. Castells mentions three: the first is to establish
new linkages with the world economy via the criminal economy of drug
production and trafficking, illegal arms deals, and even commerce in human
beings. The second is the expression of utter desperation that has transformed entire regions—mainly in Africa—into self-destructive battlegrounds. A third reaction is the rise of ideological/religious fundamentalism, in opposition to a “development model” which threatens long-held cultural beliefs and identities (Castells 1983, 38-39).

There is a fourth reaction, moreover, that emerged in Latin America in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, when economic setbacks and persistent social inequalities encouraged the demand for authoritarian leadership: el retorno del líder—the return of the leader (Zermeño 1989)—, of neo-caudillos such as Fujimori and Menem, who have played the part of Weberian plebiscitary figures, preserving a semblance of democracy and implementing painful but indispensable economic reforms, while at the same time strengthening their personal power.

Hugo Chávez belongs in this company, but with a difference: rather than attempting to introduce market reforms, Chávez sees “neoliberalism” as an enemy. His “revolution” represents a more radical reaction to the impact of globalization, an attempt not only to exempt us from the demands of capitalist productivity and global competition, but also to lead us down the uncharted path of a new, original, “true democracy”. It is no wonder that this renewed experiment in populist utopia-building is taking place first in Venezuela, a country that has been able to postpone—thanks to oil—acknowledgement of the unraveling of the statist model, and where there is little awareness that we cannot continue living forever in an economy based purely on redistribution rather than wealth creation.

For a while during the past decade the very idea of military rule looked thoroughly discredited in Latin America. Also, after the terrible experiences of defeat and repression in the 1960s and 1970s, the coming apart of the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions, and the worldwide collapse of the socialist utopia, many thought that the Latin American left had learned the correct lessons: “Democracy, despised and decried by the left during the 1960s and 1970s as an empty procedure, a fallacious formality, was discovered anew in the prisons and torture chambers of diverse dictatorships...Procedural democracy—discovered through their painful learning process—was not the empty shell it had once seemed” (Gorriti 1994, 170). For some time, these developments lessened the threats to
democracy from the military and the revolutionary left. But popular
disappointment with the slow pace of economic reforms, the increase of
poverty in the region, and a crisis of identity within the military, are slowly
changing the situation.

The left is now re-emerging, and in some cases –Venezuela and Ecuador
are examples– it has forged links with radicalized sectors in the armed forces.
This is, to be sure, a revamped left, that no longer disdains “formal”
democracy but embraces it as a kind of instrument to achieve a new utopia:
democracy without capitalism. The main target of this newly-formed radical
coalition of the old left and military radicals is the market system, which it
calls “neo-liberalism”, while at the same time elevating nationalism to center
stage. As Fidel Castro –much admired by Hugo Chávez– put it in his speech
at the 4th Sao Paulo Forum in 1993: “Neoliberalism means the total
plundering of our peoples”. What the new anti-market coalition proposes is
“real democratization” as a way forward, a definition of democracy that
goes beyond procedural terms and includes a “surplus of meaning” in terms
of ideals of social justice and equality (Panizza 1993, 266). Chávez reflected
this when he said –just to give but one instance– that “(The poor in
Venezuela) cannot buy meat; they cook the banana peel…to substitute for
meat, to give to their children because they have none…Thus, there isn’t
democracy here” (Quoted by Norden 1995, 20).

The rejection of markets, of capitalism and of globalization is giving rise to
a confused but nevertheless significant grouping of military and civilian
radicals who know very well what they are against (“empty” democracy,
capitalism, neoliberalism, globalization), but seem to be quite vague as to
what they stand for. By and large commentators of this tendency speak of a
radical democracy that has yet to be conceptually fleshed-out (Rénique 1994,
65); others refer to a nebulous socialist democracy or a democratic
collectivism inspired by the Indian communities of Latin America (Petras
and Morley 1992, 1-3). The argument is that representative democracy, as
it exists in the advanced West, though in some ways desirable, is not
sufficient. One must go further to achieve “authentic”, “participatory” or
“true” democracy (Maingot 1994, 179). This is precisely what Hugo Chávez
has been insisting upon ever since he first had the chance to address the
Venezuelan people in 1994. But it remains impossible to this day to find
anything like a clear definition of what this “true” democracy would be
like, or even what is meant by direct participative democracy, an obscure
notion much talked about in Venezuela these days and which has found its way into the new Constitution (Art. 70). Nor is it at all clear how the new radicals propose to avoid the well-trodden path by which elimination of free markets leads to the elimination of democracy and individual liberties— that is, the road beginning in anti-capitalism and concluding in a dictatorship of a “popular democracy” type (Romero 1996a).

In the Venezuelan context, the bitterness of a people convinced that forty years of puntofijista democracy were no more than a continuous process of looting by corrupt politicians, has been compounded by the populist appeal of Bolivarian Fundamentalism, the official ideology of the “Chavista revolution”, an ideology which to a significant extent articulates the frustrations of the millions of marginalized and poorest Venezuelans. According to this vague view of things, just as Bolívar achieved independence from Spain, so today’s “true revolutionaries” must fight for independence from “neoliberalism”. This means above all the elimination of the “corrupt elites” that dominated Venezuela over the past four decades (a mission largely accomplished already), and the transformation of society according to Bolivar’s teachings. And what are these? Chávez’s own highly distorted and simplistic interpretation of Bolivar’s doctrinal legacy, starts from a crudely conceived nationalism, which sees Venezuelans as the virtuous victims of corruption and foreign interests. The nation is perceived as embodied in the state, and the state is incarnated in the leader who, as the people’s protector, must develop a direct relationship with them, non-mediated by institutional constraints (Ceresole 1999). It corresponds to the state to control the “strategic sectors” of the economy, to direct its course.

On the international, foreign-policy front, the basic ingredients of Chávez’s vision are these: First, The United States is not an ally of Venezuela, but an adversary; it is enormously powerful but is also showing signs of “geo-strategic weakness”; the Venezuelan “revolution” must capitalize on that weakness, although for the time being Washington’s wishes must in some cases be accommodated. Second, the Cuban model is worth imitating; Cuba is a true ally of Venezuela, and—in Chávez’s own words— we are “sailing together along the same course towards a better future”. Third, Venezuelan oil policy must revitalize the OPEC cartel, striving for higher prices through strict adherence to quotas, rather than increasing volumes of production and searching for new markets.
This is not, on the face of it, a particularly well thought out, ideologically sophisticated political and economic program, while at the same time it must be said that one is hard put to try and discover any such clearly formulated program behind the “Chavista revolution”. What we find, rather, is an emotional response to a situation of profound discontent on the part of a people, 87% of which think that the changes they would like to see do not depend on their own will and personal efforts, but must be implemented by a strong, benevolent and paternalistic government (El Nacional 19 October 1999, C/2), a people who believe the “Chavista revolution” will finally deliver the goods and fulfill their long-postponed expectations of material well-being. To them, to the great majority of Venezuelans, the “Chavista revolution” represents an additional attempt, perhaps the last one, to find the magic formula that will secure a fair and efficient distribution of the country’s “riches” among its inhabitants.

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The reality of military nationalism joining leftist anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism is nothing terribly new in Latin America. What gives some originality to the Venezuelan situation is the highly charged political messianism of the Bolivarianos, the core-group of Chávez’s military followers, and of Chávez himself. Other aspects of their behavior belong to the well-known pattern of military interventionism in 20th century Latin America: “Everywhere officers seek to prove the worth of the institution and expect civilians to prove their own worth” (Nunn 1995, 28). What else is new? Hugo Chávez is promising paradise around the corner to Venezuelans: this is what all puntofijista rulers did, ever since Pérez assumed power for the first time in 1973 and soon received a massive influx of petrodollars, which was rapidly wasted. This time, however, there is a much wider gap between the people’s illusions and the realities of the “revolution”, between Chávez’s initial prospects and the actual circumstances of a changed international environment.

The original chavista project was conceived, in the early 1980s, for a world that no longer exists, a world in which the Berlin Wall was still standing, where political radicalism and revolution were still fashionable among intellectual elites in Latin America, the U.S., and Western Europe, and where the socialist utopia still held its spell. However, faced with a new, unfriendly environment, the “Chavista revolution” is fast developing into a confused,
anachronistic response to the challenges of life in the 21st century. There is a vast, daily-growing abyss between rhetoric and fact in Chávez’s Venezuela, where the main feature still distancing the new regime from *puntofijismo*—apart from the much stronger military involvement in politics— is the defensive nature of *chavista* populism, in contrast to the assertive and ascendant populism of the past (Barrios-Ferrer 1999, 9). In other words, while under *puntofijismo* in its glory days there was a coalition of the middle and working classes, fighting together to create a system of redistribution and political participation, under *chavismo* we are contemplating the disappearance of what little was left of the middle and industrial working classes, and the attempt by the millions of marginalized poor to recover hope, by giving Chávez all the power he has asked for in the new Constitution, expecting that he will shore up the shattered ruins of the *rentier* model.

Chávez’s political base of support lies with those masses of poor Venezuelans, who also voted for Pérez in 1989 and Caldera in 1993, and with the same objective in mind: to insulate us from the demands of a world perceived as hostile, making our dream of oil-financed welfare for all come true. The military have also backed Chávez, at least until now, but the signs of discontent in the armed forces multiply daily. At first they regained political power and prestige, together with major institutional prerogatives, among them total autonomy from civilian control; but it is highly doubtful that a majority in the officer corps identify with the more radical aspects of Chávez’s rhetoric, his anti-Americanism, his sympathies with Castro and the Colombian guerrillas. Furthermore, the military can accept Chávez’s policy of resentment only as long as it does not reach them too. Other components of Chávez’s platform: opposition to continued privatization, military-run social support for the poor, creation of reserved areas for indigenous peoples, are probably seen with a mixture of reservation and concern by many in the armed forces, who wonder where this is all this leads to in the end.

For all his rhetoric, Hugo Chávez cannot flee from the world we live in. He remains as dependent on the international financial markets as his predecessors, as Venezuela needs to have access to the global capital markets if we want to grow economically in the coming months and years. Chávez has risen to power by promising Venezuelans to increase their standards of living, but “He cannot deliver the latter without either cutting dramatically
into investment for development or by borrowing in the international markets. If he genuinely implements all of his policies, the foreign markets will close off to him. He will then be forced to turn oil revenues toward consumption, creating economic crises a few years down the road” (Global Intelligence Update, December 30, 1999). Already the economic results of Chávez’s first two years in power point toward what may be in store for us further down the road. During his first year the economy fell 7.2%, unemployment increased from 11.4% to 15.4% (although there are reasons to doubt the accuracy of this particular official figure, given the high number of daily bankruptcies in industry, commerce, and agricultural businesses); household consumption was down 4.8%, and gross capital formation 24.9%. Depressed demand helped to reduce inflation from 29% to 20%, but imports fell $3,065, or 20.7% (Veneconomy Weekly, January 12, 2000). The lack of international and domestic investors’ confidence in Venezuela can be illustrated by just one fact: for the first time in many years, possibly ever, the price of Venezuelan debt bonds went down, despite the fact that the price of oil significantly increased. With the new, much higher oil prices, the Venezuelan government became “rich” once again, for a while, but the society still was, and has remained, poor. In the much-changed conditions prevailing in 2001, the country’s economic and social deterioration is reaching boiling point.

Politically, the “Chavista revolution” has produced a new Constitution, considered by many —rightly, in my view— as a disaster in its own right. Hastily drafted, after little meaningful debate, by an assembly 95% of which was composed of the President’s followers, the new document is even more statist and populist than the one it replaced. In sum, the new chavista constitutional precepts correspond perfectly to O’Donnell’s definition of a “delegative democracy”, one in which the president “governs as he sees fit, constrained only by the hard facts of existing power relations and by a constitutionally limited term of office” (O’Donnell 1994, 60). The fact, really, is that according to the new Constitution the president is for all practical purposes all-powerful, and checks and balances are weakened to an extreme.

Hugo Chávez has won all the elections and referenda he has called forth. He has done so, however, in the context of a persistent 50% or more of electoral abstention, and with the persevering opposition of at least 30% of the active electorate. The electoral system now being used has been designed
to facilitate hegemonic supremacy by the President and his movement, with little respect for minorities. One wonders what they want this enormous power for, given the meager results the chavista revolution can show on the social and economic fields. This feverish process of concentration of power brings to mind the metaphor of the driver of a car heading out of control in an unknown direction, down a precipitous mountain road, and seeking desperately “to capture the wheel; for if he could but do this, his inevitable descent would represent order and not chaos” (Kissinger 1977, 205). Before becoming President, Hugo Chávez bitterly criticized the elitist and monopolistic political controls exercised by the old puntofijista parties; but his government has not improved on these at all. It can cynically be asked: why should he change those politically corrupt practices, considering that they had an almost flawless forty-year old record of successes? In its political dimension, too, the “Chavista revolution” is still very much attached to the unattractive legacy of four decades of mediocre “democratic” ways, predicated upon distrust of the people by their rulers, and the systematic predation of the petro-state.

5

During the “puntofijista” period a number of legal and political mechanisms were implemented to achieve civilian control of the military. For some decades they worked with remarkable efficiency, but along the rosy path they decayed in step with the decadence of the system itself. Now the rise to power of Hugo Chavez has ushered in a deep upheaval in the scheme of civic-military relationships in Venezuela. Its impact can be measured, on the one hand, by the increased level of politicization of the armed forces, and, on the other, by the dismantling of the institutional setup of civilian control designed to rein them in. In relation to the first of these premises, the new regime has changed the emphasis on the mission of the armed forces from being strictly a defensive force to that of aiding “development” and committing itself directly to the revolution’s goals of social change (through the so-called “Plan Bolívar 2.000”). Quite visibly already in this respect is the appointment of many officers to administrative posts in the government, both, at the national and at the regional level, where they have been assigned responsibility for executing ambitious plans of social and economic support for the populace. Some of these changes have even attained constitutional ranking (see articles 328 and 330 of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic). In relation to the second premise above, that of civilian
control, the new Constitution eliminates parliamentary control of promotions in the armed forces, leaving them fully to the discretion of the military institution itself, except for the top ranks of general and admiral which are now exclusively reserved to the President of the Republic. Furthermore the Constitution aims to unify the armed forces under a single command structure, changing in the process the traditional designation “Fuerzas Armadas” to “Fuerza Armada Nacional”, which no doubt, on first sight, might seem a positive functional development, were it not for the fact that its true underlying, solidly political intention is that of bringing centralized control into the hands of the head of state. To sum it up, under the new state of affairs the only elected figure with a constitutional link to the armed forces, and we are talking here of a crucial link, is the President himself (Trinkunas, 2,000, 35-36).

The increased military participation in government affairs is bound to intensify the level of political activity and awareness of the officers, much to the unavoidable detriment of their professionalism. Moreover, the new president has indicated quite clearly his avowed intention to disregard the norm, enacted in the new constitution, to the effect that active military personnel are barred from being candidates in elections at all levels. Riding roughshod over the constitution seems to be one of his favorite sports. Indeed, we have already witnessed the case of a high ranking officer involved in the proselitizing program “Plan Bolivar 2000” applying for dubious, fast track retirement in order to present his candidacy to the governorship of one of our states. One can easily imagine the deleterious effects that this process will have, rather sooner than later, in terms of the necessary unity, stability and operational capability of the military sector. It is quite revealing to observe the numerous scandals already being denounced at all levels, as far up as the office of the former, alas, General Comptroller, in relation to discretionary spending by the military of enormous sums dedicated to the execution of “Plan Bolivar 2000”. A serious danger is lurking here of further stoking up corruption in the armed forces, the opposite always being, no doubt, a difficult proposition, as a consequence of its politization, all in accordance with the ideology of the chavista “project”.

Just as the general population would seem to be gradually questioning the revolutionary departure of the government, on account, mainly, of its meager socio-economic results, it would seem reasonable to assume that discontent will increase in the armed forces towards a “project” that collides
head-on with cherished values, traditions, principles and alliances cultivated for long time in their midst. From relatively minor concerns, such as the use by the president of military uniform, that of lieutenant colonel, in public appearances, an action which violates in the eyes of many officers the core principle of military hierarchy, to the more serious of discontinuing the important, annual joint maneuvers “UNITAS” and “Red Flag”, of the Navy and the Air Force, respectively, to which one may add (insult to injury) the presidential decision of December of 1999 to reject the US offer of humanitarian aid after the natural tragedy occurred in our north coast, aid, let it be remarked, coming in the shape of two warships fully loaded with equipment and engineers of the US army; all this, let me repeat, must have impacted in a negative way our military structure.

The armed forces are being threatened in their dignity, in their professionalism, in their operative capacity, and in their institutional mission. In a society plagued by insecurity and fear, subject to constant violation of its territory by Colombian narcoguerrillas, harassed by unceasing criminal violence, our soldiers ironically find themselves selling vegetable produce in low income areas and repainting little school buildings, while watching wide-eyed how their hierarchical essence deteriorates with the glorification of the subversive officers who took part in the 1992 coup d’etats, and experiencing concurrently the silent humiliation of those who, on the contrary, in 1992 remained faithful to their institutional oath and defeated the uprising (a military victory later turned into ashes, courtesy of the miopia and pettiness of the civilian leadership of the time). The consequences of politicization “from above”, on the other hand, could hardly have been more harmful and perverse in its effects on the operational capacity of the Armed Forces. Numerous have been the admonishments in this respect. The Venezuelan military, that had achieved, by its professionalism and combat readiness, a preeminent place in the Latin American context during the period of “puntofijismo”, is today, sadly to say, stripped by the revolution of their true role, turned gradually into a sort of popular militia, manipulated for social-economic proselitizing of the polulace, while simultaneously highly valuable and costly weapons systems rust away on account of their misuse in “Plan Bolivar 2000”, or as consequence of neglect and lack of resources for adequate maintenance. Step by step, the Venezuelan Armed Forces are ceasing to be an instrument to preserve our sovereignty and constitutional stability to become mere instruments for a personalist political project that pretends, not only to subject society to a state of permanent
internal conflict, but, also, to realign the country geopolitically as a fixture in a new “multipolar” axis confronting the United States of America.

What to do? How should the Venezuelan Armed Forces face up to these dangers? To begin with, they must fully analyze and comprehend the nature of the threats hovering over them: a threat to their dignity, a threat to their professionalism and operational capabilities, a threat to their unity and institutional mission. If this is a fair rendering of their plight, as I do firmly believe it is, then it behooves the Armed Forces to mind three fronts: first, to defend its dignity and preserve its unity, clearly disassociating itself from a political project that perverts its essence, leading it to an abyss; second, to recover its operational capability, seriously degraded by a demagogic strategy whose end goal, no doubt, is to weaken the military sector so that it cannot be a significant obstacle to the personalist concentration of power; and, third, to prevent the radical, ideological anachronism of the new political leaders from carrying out their project to align Venezuela in a new geopolitical axis, together with Castro’s Cuba, the fundamentalist states of the Middle East, the Colombian guerrilla organizations FARC and ELN and other revolutionary movements in Latin America, converting our country into a regional and global subversion center.

What is a revolutionary? Henry Kissinger once remarked with perspicacity that the answer can not possibly be easy, for otherwise revolutionaries would seldom be successful, as their adversaries would have clear, ample warning of the threat and would act decisively against them (Kissinger, 1976, 394-395). History is evidence, moreover, that revolutionaries are victorious not precisely because they practice deceit about their goals, but because their enemies don’t take them seriously. Only when it is too late, in retrospect, when the consequences are already irreversible, does it become clear that the declared revolutionary objectives were to be believed. Hitler’s case is one of the more revealing: he always said and wrote what he planned to do; he did not deceive anyone, yet few believed him. The communists proudly declared that they disdained to hide their intentions, but Lenin was shuttled in 1917 by the German High Military Command from Switzerland to Russia in a sealed train car, surely congratulating themselves on their clever Machiavellian move. On the other hand the bolshevist leader had sarcastically announced that “we will sell the last capitalist the rope with which we will hang him”. Admittedly, Fidel Castro dexterously dissembled for a short while, nonetheless he is also a good example of the political and
psychological difficulties that becloud minds in every attempt to timely detect, and contain, a revolutionary menace. Let us be reminded too that in 1958 the newly constituted Venezuelan democratic government shipped arms to the Sierra Maestra, to the romantic bearded men who then proceeded, also with ample help from certain sectors of the US, to topple the hated Batista, while Washington just folded its arms as the guerrillas advanced on Havana. It is not a question of stupidity, but of shortsightedness, or shall we say blindness?

Not wishing to minimize the obviously changed post cold war circumstances, it is still a fact that Latin America as a whole is facing a new, very serious revolutionary menace embodied in the radical, messianic Chávez leadership. No matter that Chávez has time and again stated what he believes in, and why he believes it, no matter that he has announced time and again, he is not one given to understatement or economy in words! in numberless speeches what he intends to do, and has dispelled any lingering doubts about his peculiar convictions, somehow through a classical denial mechanism there are those who still cling to the hope that these pronouncements are the product of some passing virus fever, that he will in the end turn out to be no more than a new mild version of Menem or Cardoso, who will surely abandon populism and the fiery leftist rhetoric for Wall Street’s hymns.

It is just an illusory hope, but regrettably it has not been easy to convince the self-deluded that Chávez must be approached seriously, that his words are to be taken at face value, that they are not the dreams of an adolescent who shall mature once he knows which side the toast is buttered on. The naked truth is quite different. Chávez is a true revolutionary well steeped in the two-steps-forward-one step-backwards school. It should be evident for all to see that he acts out firm convictions with a clear strategy. But, mind you, this is not meant to say that his ideology is coherent, or that his cherished beliefs can pass muster before a rigorous philosophical test. On the other hand the inherent confusion and scant academic value of his Weltanschauung does not vouch for its harmlessness, quite the contrary. Chávez fancies himself as the torch bearer of a revolutionary mission, a reincarnation of Bolivar, sword in hand, ready to sunder the chains of the new empire. In truth his “Bolivarianism” is more an emotion than a well established social theory, it is rather a search for an imaginary glorious past, a monument to dead ideas, to quote Walter Raleigh’s scathing condemnation of Milton’s
Paradise Lost. On the other hand, if he does not really know very well what paradise regained should hold, he is more precise in what he hates: Western style representative democracy, which he qualifies as “false” democracy; capitalism and free markets, which promote in his opinion “social injustice”, though he tolerates markets out of opportunism, for the time being, “por ahora” to ape him; political pluralism, which he combats every day, slowly throttling opposition to his government; and the centers of “unipolar” power, concretely, the USA and its allies. Chavez’s geopolitical vision projects a radical transformation in Latin America, led by “Bolivarian armies” in alliance with Castro’s Cuba, the radical Muslim states (Irak, Iran, Lybia), as mainstays of a revamped OPEC together with Venezuela, a newly belligerent Russia, and communist China. In the global struggle against “savage neoliberalism” any ally is welcome so long as it shares the same enemies: the USA, Israel, the “oligarchies” of Latin America. Thus Chávez sympathizes with Colombia’s guerrilla movements, nay, supports them, witness the rejection of US overflights, makes common cause with the subversive Ecuadorian military, and votes for Cuba and Iran when their human rights record is assailed in the UN. It follows too that he rejected American aid on the ocassion of the natural catastrophe that befell Venezuela in December 1999, while at the same time welcoming and abiding the continued presence of hundreds of Cuban “physicians”, regardless of repeated protests on the part of the Venezuelan Medical Federation.

Whether the foregoing is a fantasy for some, or a nightmare for others, is a moot point, it is clear that Chávez firmly believes in the apparent mishmash of ideas outlined above. If European leaders at the point of deciding to enter the great war had been asked in 1914 to appraise the doctrines of an obscure Russian agitator exiled in Switzerland, they would very likely have laughed them off as a fairy tale for children. Likewise, if some astrologer in the US State Department had predicted in 1959 that a Marxist Fidel Castro was to govern Cuba for the next 41 years, would he not have been consigned for psychiatric treatment? Not to mention the gruesome, outlandish speeches of that beer hall orator of the Munich twenties exciting to paroxysms his audiences with the prospect of the annihilation of the jews. Were they taken at face value by Germany’s conservative elite?

Times have changed. We live in the internet era. Revolutionaries encounter higher hurdles to be cleared. Democracy and free markets are the codewords of a globalized reality. True enough, but are we to accept that the path of
history is linear? Are we so naive to suppose that these are times of increasing, irreversible achievement of perfect freedom? Such illusory beliefs are actually dangerous. Latin America is facing difficult times ahead as it gropes to find an adequate response to the increasing tensions tearing at the social fabric, imposed by the challenges of globalization. It is in fact the singular significance of leaders like Chávez, that would be invented if they did not exist, that they promise the vast incomprehending majorities relief and protection from those challenges. In these circumstances the call of a radicalized ideology can spread like wildfire on a dry parched prairie. At the very least Chávez represents the return to a demagogic destructive populism, but he poses a more complex threat of a fundamental geopolitical nature. Neither Washington nor a good number of Latin America leaders, not to speak of so many fellow travellers who sing the praises of the strong man who insults and offends them on a daily basis, seem to have adequately realized the actual dimension of the Chávez phenomenon. He, meanwhile, gradually advances toward his goals, beclouding with half truths the vision of his potential adversaries. He persists in his unswerving course, passionately, steadfast. Not all of us, let it be said, will be surprised when Hugo Chávez’ true colors are clearly revealed for all to see.

In a book first published in 1938, Crane Brinton argued that revolutions have a three-stage process of development: moderate, extremist, and “Thermidorian” (rule by one man: Napoleon, Stalin, Mao, Castro) (Brinton 1962). It would appear, according to the evidence now available, that the “Chavista revolution” has mixed up the three stages into one; it combines fiery rhetoric with practices that are rooted in the past, and shows unequivocal signs of personalization and concentration of power at the presidential level. I do not think that what is happening in Venezuela can legitimately be branded a “revolution” in any rigorous sense of the term (Kaplan 1973). Nor does the chavista experiment represent “reequilibration” of democracy in Linz’s sense, that is, a political process that, “after a crisis that has seriously threatened the continuity and stability of the basic democratic political mechanisms, results in their continued existence at the same or higher levels of democratic legitimacy, efficacy, and effectiveness” (Linz 1978, 87). What we are observing here is neither renewal nor reequilibration of democracy; it is not yet a revolution either, but a process of uninterrupted and protracted political, socioeconomic, and cultural degradation of an entire rentier society,
obsessively searching for the mirage of a vanished prosperity. Venezuelan society today is a bewildered and embittered one, that has deposited its illusions in the hands of a military caudillo, after having lost all faith in the traditional political class.

The paradoxical nature of the chavista political process lies in the fact that, in spite of its revolutionary ambitions, it represents in essence another effort to restore the old statist-populist system in Venezuela, trying to make it function under different historical conditions –domestic and international. The new regime is in some crucial respects similar to the old one, although in the prevailing circumstances, with the traditional parties and institutions gone, we are witnessing a process of personalization and militarization of power relationships, that had been brought under some control under puntofijismo. The popularity of one man among the impoverished masses, and the institutional weight of the armed forces as a “last resort”, guaranteeing a precarious social truce and a minimum of order, are the two pillars of the chavista regime. Apart from these, there is little else. Given that Hugo Chávez is apparently convinced that he is on the right track, and consequently does not see the need to modify his policies, I think that what we can expect to happen in Venezuela in the coming months and years is the continuation of our political, socioeconomic and cultural degradation, a situation that will aggravate the resentments and frustrations simmering in our society.

In theory, Chávez has three options: first, to muddle through, much as his predecessors during the puntofijista period did, hoping to prolong the plebiscitary legitimacy of his rule; second, to radicalize his “revolution”, intensifying political repression and military control; and finally to go against the structural grain of rentier economics and the petro-state. The last option is, I think, out of the question, for it would require telling the truth to a people that are not willing to hear it, and particularly not from somebody like Chávez, who came to power to fulfill a dream. On the contrary, Chávez wants control, and the rentier economy, that concentrates economic power in the state, gives him a great deal of political leverage. In the economic field, muddling through will be tried, until the inevitable erosion of Chávez’s popularity –already much in evidence in late 200– and the enduring crisis open the way for more momentous decisions in a “revolutionary” direction.

To sum up: I believe that Venezuelan society has experienced over the last few years what Karl Deutsch would call a process of “pathological” political
learning. Let us understand here the term “political learning” as a process of cognitive change “through which people modify their political beliefs and tactics as a result of severe crises, frustrations, and dramatic changes in the environment” (Bermeo 1992, 274). This process of societal learning can assume several forms –creative, pathological, or merely viable. In the first case, the society’s learning process increases its ranges of possible intake of information from the outside world. If the learning process is pathological, it reduces the society’s subsequent capacity to learn, to adapt itself to new circumstances and overcome new challenges. Finally, if the learning process is merely viable it neither adds nor detracts from the society’s subsequent capacities for learning and self-steering (Deutsch 1963, 169). What Venezuelan society has done is to encapsulate itself in the old certainties, turning its back from a changing world.

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After seventeen years of Chavista rule in Venezuela, the right-wing opposition has now swept the board in elections to the country’s National Assembly, giving rise to a political deadlock. Can you talk us through the electoral geography and demography of the December 2015 vote? There was no serious critique of the Venezuelan economy, which is fundamentally a rentier economy based on oil. A small group of very wealthy families have dominated Venezuela for the last century, and they did a remarkably good job of insulating themselves from the Bolivarian Revolution. Efforts to recentralize the police force were strongly resisted by governors and the right-wing opposition, who claimed that Chávez was trying to concentrate power in his own hands. In the Venezuelan context, the bitterness of a people convinced that forty years of puntofijista democracy were no more than a continuous process of looting by corrupt politicians, has been compounded by the populist appeal of Bolivarian Fundamentalism, the official ideology of the “Chavista revolution”, an ideology which to a significant extent articulates the frustrations of the millions of marginalized and poorest Venezuelans. People who believe the “Chavista revolution” will finally deliver the goods and fulfill their long-postponed expectations of material well-being.

The role of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) in the current Venezuelan political and institutional crisis has been the subject of a raft of analyses, public statements, Tweets, and expectations. Essentially, the FANB are considered key to balancing or even unblocking the political and institutional course of future Venezuela. Based on the FANB’s current pivotal hold on power, there are three possible scenarios: the chavista-madurista power structure will remain unchanged; the FANB will attend Guaidó’s call through his proposed Amnesty Law, triggering a major institutional breakdown that ignores Maduro’s authority; or as the institutional arbitrator, the FANB will broker a political transition. The rich and reactionary in Venezuela and their allies in Washington celebrated when Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez died two years ago on March 5, 2013. US President Barack Obama did not even make the customary and common courtesy of sending condolences. The Chavistas have no illusions about what their opposition represented, as a Chávista flyer from the 2013 election campaign shows Uncle Sam wearing a Capriles mask. Chávista militants continually raise the examples of Chile in 1973 and more recently of Libya and Syria where the US used destabilization efforts to try to foment regime change.

About the author. Roger D. Harris is president of the Task Force on the Americas. Key words: Venezuela Armed Forces Civil-Military Relations Bolivarian Revolution Hugo Chávez Nicholas Maduro. This CMI Working Paper is a publication from the project Everyday Maneuvers: Military-Civilian Relations in Latin America and the Middle East. The project explores the historical, cultural and political ties between military actors and civilians, and is financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.