

**Four Stages in the Chávez Government's Approach to Participation**

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## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The guiding issue for my thinking on participation in Venezuela is what I see as the dilemma of participatory democracy in Latin America. On the one hand, a liberal strategy of reducing the state's involvement in society and thereby allowing civil associations to sprout up like mushrooms after the rain indeed generates an autonomous and independent civil society. However, this civil society usually has a strong class bias with middle and upper-middle classes best positioned to develop neighborhood associations, new social movements and other non-governmental organizations.<sup>2</sup> In addition, by virtue of its independence and autonomy, it is hard to bring liberal civil society into any sort of transformative project of the left that seeks to address durable social and economic inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, an engaged strategy of state sponsorship and articulation can generate considerable participation and power among excluded classes.<sup>4</sup> It can also unify participatory forms into an overall project of social and economic transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Kirk Hawkins and Margarita López Maya for their comments on this article.

<sup>2</sup> See Dylan Riley and Juan J Fernandez. 2006. "The Authoritarian Foundations of Civic Culture: Spain and Italy in Comparative Perspective." Institute of Industrial Relations Working Paper Series, University of California Berkeley, paper iirwps-135-06.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth M. Roberts 1999. *Deepening Democracy? The Modern Left and Social Movements in Chile and Peru*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. María Pilar Garcia-Guadilla. 2003. "Civil Society: Institutionalization, Fragmentation, Autonomy" En el libro, *Venezuelan Politics in The Chávez Era*. Edited by Steve Ellner & Daniel Hellinger. Lynne Rienner Publishers. Boulder London ISBN 1-58826-108-5 pp. 179-196.

<sup>4</sup> Riley and Fernandez, op. cit.

However, without autonomy, the threat that the state will make it into a clientalistic appendage or, what is worse, use it to gain a totalitarian reach into society, is perpetual.<sup>5</sup>

I will argue that we can see four stages in the Chavez government's engagement of citizen participation as it has moved from a project of deepening political democracy to a project of extending democracy into the economic and political spheres. The government has moved from an original focus on harnessing existing forms of participation, to a strategy of sponsoring participation, to an attempt at centralization of participation, to the current policy of go-slow centralization.<sup>6</sup> In the process of putting forward this conceptualization I will make reference to my research on religious groups as well as what has now become the centerpiece of the government's participation policy: the new communal councils.

### **Harnessing Participation (1999-2002)**

In 1998 Hugo Chavez went from being an outsider candidate in the single digits, to a landslide winner of the presidential contest because of a highly effective multivalent message of participatory democracy. In his rise from outsider candidate to a president with a mandate he used populist charisma and fire to promise to the lower classes social and economic transformation that would come through participatory democracy. He

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<sup>5</sup>Stokes, Susan. 1995. *Cultures in Conflict: Social Movements and the State in Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> These types of engagement can only be seen as temporal stages in terms of which predominates in a given period as each of them has been present simultaneously throughout the Chávez period. For example, one notable initiative that takes place during the "harnessing participation" period which clearly represents a case of "sponsoring participation" is the government's push to spread "Bolivarian Circles" in 2001 and 2002, see Hawkins, Kirk A. and David R. Hansen. 2006. Dependent Civil Society: The Círculos Bolivarianos in Venezuela. *Latin American Research Review*. 41 (1): 102-32. Nevertheless I would maintain that the primary strategy during this period was "harnessing participation."

simultaneously reached out to the center left with a clear and credible promise to integrally incorporate civil society in governance through a new constitution.

Throughout its first years, the dilemma of a government that considered itself revolutionary trying to govern with a cacophony of civil society, came to the fore.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the class-based nature of many civil organizations surfaced and began to clash with the government's priorities. Being predominantly middle and upper-middle class they were relatively less sympathetic to some of the populist distributive policies on the table as well as plans for structural reform.

On the other hand, the difficulty of bringing diverse groups into a national project surfaced. Many of them represented concretely-defined diverse interests and fiercely protect their autonomy and self-definition. The attempt by the Chávez government to bring religious associations into its governing project provides a case in point. From November 2000 to May 2001 the Chávez Administration attempted to organize a "Bolivarian Inter-religious Parliament" that would bring together representatives of all of the different religions in Venezuela with the goal of devolving governmental social projects and transferring funds to them. The Catholic Hierarchy immediately criticized this initiative, calling it an attempt to "make the Church into an appendage of the government." And the main Evangelical associations did the same. They suggested that they could pay for their own social projects. Most interestingly, their particular religious outlook didn't mesh into the governments' attempts to bring them into an organization of

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<sup>7</sup> Garcia-Guadilla op. cit.; Luis Salamanca 2004. "Civil Society: Late Bloomers," *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*. Edited by Jennifer L. McCoy and David J Meyers. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

associations lumped as “religious.” More concretely they bristled at being lumped together with afro-Venezuelan and new age.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the Chavez government’s original attempt to harness preexisting civil society was much more difficult and much less successful than the government expected and they began to govern without some of the consultative processes that they had promised, and they progressively marginalized dissenting voices.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that the period of intensive conflict of 2002-04 started over these issues of participation--the government’s increasing attempt not only to deepen democracy but to extend it into the economic sphere was the primary cause-- but the role and shape of civil society became an important point of contention. Indeed one important part of the opposition coalition consisted of those civil associations predating Chavez that rejected the increasingly authoritarian direction of a government that had promised participatory democracy. Indeed the opposition movement frequently referred to itself during this period as “la sociedad civil”

So a central irony in recent Venezuelan history is that by 2002 a president who rode to electoral victory in 1998 under the master-trope of participatory democracy, by 2002 had “civil society” as one of its main opponents.

### **Sponsoring Participation (2003-06)**

The intensive period of conflict that reached its peak with the general strike from December 2002 to February 2003 significantly changed the government’s perception of participation. While on the one hand classic autonomous civil society became a

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<sup>8</sup> David Smilde. 2004. "Contradiction without Paradox: Evangelical Political Culture in the 1998 Venezuelan Elections," *Latin American Politics and Society* Vol.46, No.1 (Spring).

formidable foe of the Chavez government, pro-Chavez participatory groups provided key support during the struggle. Community media groups, for example, showed themselves to be decisive during the media blackout that formed part of the 2002 coup.<sup>9</sup> What is most interesting here is how this conflict led to a new stage in the government's policy, one that I will call sponsoring participation.

After the resolution of the general strike in 2003, the government's strategy of extending democracy into the social and economic realms began to bear fruit. Reforms in the petroleum regime mean more disposable income for the government. New social policies brought healthcare, education and basic foodstuffs to the poorest population. New opportunities for productive cooperatives, land reform, and property titles took hold in decades-old squatters' settlements as well as rural areas. All of these reforms kicked-in and essentially amount to the government sponsoring various forms of participation in extra-household activities.<sup>10</sup>

Increasingly, state banks began disbursing grants and loans to non-governmental organizations for their social projects. Of course, in a highly politicized context, these were frequently funneled towards pro-Chavez organizations. So, for example, at the end of July 2004, several neopentecostal groups received \$400,000 from the government for a project to foment peace and dialogue. They used the money for several small workshops but also two large rallies—the “Clamor for Venezuela” and the “Million Prayers for Peace” rally. At the rallies, the organizers claimed to speak for the entire evangelical movement in throwing their support behind the Chávez government. Chávez himself

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<sup>9</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, forthcoming. “Radio Bemba in an Age of Electronic Media: The Dynamics of Popular Communication in Chávez's Venezuela.” *Participation and Public Sphere in Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy*. David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (eds.). Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Luis Lander and Margarita López Maya. Forthcoming. “Participatory Democracy in Venezuela: Ideas and Achievements.” *Op.cit.* Smilde and Hellinger.

gave a 40-minute speech in which he called Jesus the “original comandante” and referred to himself as a “soldier of Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

But the government financial disbursements to Evangelical groups cannot be reduced to such crass examples of political patronage. Indeed many Evangelical as well as Catholic Churches received government financial support for their social projects during this period. Two Evangelical pastors I have been working with received large grants from the Banco del Desarrollo. One is the pastor of an Evangelical church in a small Andean town—one of my key informants for over ten years—who received \$400,000 to build a substance abuse center. The other is from a pastor in the Caracas neighborhood of La Vega who received around \$150,000 for a project to take an old abandoned baseball field, restore it and run an after-school sports program there.

And by early 2006 the new *Consejos Comunales*, or “Community Councils” (CCs) had become the centerpiece of the government’s participation policy. The CCs are to be local initiatives in which 200-400 households within a self-defined geographical area, consisting of 20% of the population hold elections and write a charter. They then write a history of the community, make a list of problems the community suffers, and translate these problems into projects. They request financial support from public institutions and then are charged with exercising supervision over these projects. A conformed CC consists of the executive board, the communal bank, and an accountability commission.

The 2006 law creating the CCs also created the National Presidential Commission for Popular Power consisting of Ministers and other functionaries designated by the

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<sup>11</sup> David Smilde and Coraly Pagan. Forthcoming. Christianity and Politics in Venezuela’s Bolivarian Democracy: Catholics, Evangelicals and Political Polarization. Op.cit. Smilde and Hellinger.

President. The Commission receives, prioritizes and finances the projects forwarded by the CCs through the National Communal Councils Fund. Official figures say that in 2006 18,000 CCs received close to a billion dollars of funding.<sup>12</sup>

This period I think is properly thought of as sponsoring participation because there was actually little real effort to try to coordinate and control it in this period. The neopentecostal groups that received the \$400 thousand from the government, for example, got into an embarrassing public conflict with other Evangelical associations as well as within their own congregations, and subsequently lowered their openly pro-Chavez profile--all while continuing to collaborate and receive funds from the government.

### **Centralizing Participation (2007)**

In December 2006, Chavez was reelected with over 60% of the vote because a good part of the electorate was quite happy with what they were seeing—a good economy, new infrastructure and reforms in various aspects of the public sector. Nevertheless, Chavez clearly campaigned for reelection promising a move to something called “21<sup>st</sup> C socialism” and he took this landslide vote as clear support for his plan. 2007 saw a dramatic attempt at recentralizing government including the centralization of participation. Some government ministers even speak of the installation of a “new hegemony” in Venezuela now that the old hegemony has been broken.

The proposed reform included changes seeking to centralizing participation, but the most relevant issue was probably the overarching political context of a President who had just won a landslide reelection, leading a dizzying process of centralization, and

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<sup>12</sup> Marie Deltas. Démocratie participative à la Chavez. *Le Monde*. 21 April 2007



aiming at a constitutional change that both further expand his power and make probable his perpetuation in office for foreseeable future.

One of the central dimensions of the Chávez government's engagement with participation is a close relationship between participatory groups and the institutions of the state, as many long-time activists have been drawn into the government as liaisons on the one hand, and participatory groups frequently receive advising visits from government bureaucracies, on the other. The context of political change just mentioned had a real impact on this mid-level engagement, generating an accelerated process of self-monitoring and political positioning. In this process any sort of internal debate or discussion among supporters of the government was unimaginably difficult as anybody who expressed independence or reserve exposed themselves to the threat of being leap-frogged by others smelling opportunity. Instead, the dominant reaction among mid-level government functionaries was to try outdo each other in demonstrations of one-minded loyalty to Chavez.<sup>13</sup>

Expansion of the Communal Councils during 2007 is indicative of this process. Indeed the CCs are controversial not for what they are, but for what they could become. In the best light they could be like the participatory budgeting councils created by the Worker's Party in Brazil which administer government funds for projects they have defined, but which have maintain an admirable independence from patronage politics. In the worst light, they could look more like the Comites de la Defensa de la Revolución in Cuba, functioning as local appendages of the state that coopt rather than channel local initiative. And in the process of change of 2007 this indeed seemed to be the direction of

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<sup>13</sup> For a good description of this process, see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals depiction of "moving towards the chairman" in the context of the cultural revolution in China, Roderick MacFarquhar, Michael Schoenhals. 2006. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard Belknap.

change. The original law on the CCs, passed in early 2006 was largely written in the discourse of participatory democracy and with reference to the 1999 constitution. But by 2007 the “Explosion of Communal Power” had become one of the five motors for the construction of socialism. There were frequent public ceremonies with President Chávez accompanied by representatives of the CCs with red tee shirts and hats making it seem that the CCs were the base of the new socialist party, or at least, of the new socialist society.<sup>14</sup> And at the different meeting places of the CCs there were often tables to sign-up for the PSUV.

The reform also sought to create Popular Power as a new layer of the government in addition to municipal, state and national levels of government. This Popular Power would not be elected but somehow emerge directly from “the people” which in practice would mean its functionaries would be selected by the executive branch. This reform would have abstracted funding and organization from the level of municipal and state government. Under the current legal structure, the CCs need to register with the Local Councils of Political Planning and much of their resources are funneled through municipalities and state governments, who have agreed to cede ten percent of their budgets to the CCs. This in turn would have weakened state and municipal government, the strength and vitality of which has been the main achievement of decentralization in Venezuela over the past 20 years.<sup>15</sup>

As is well known, the reform failed because of resistance to the proposal in numerous sectors that had previously been sympathetic or at least neutral with respect to the Chávez government. The highest profile dissenters were, of course, the former

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<sup>14</sup> Margarita López Maya. 2008. “Caracas: Estado, sujeto popular y cómo hacer para que las cosas funcionen.” Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> López Maya 2008. Op.cit.

Minister of Defense Raul Baduel, as well as some political parties from the Chavez coalition who actively campaigned against it. Christian churches also weighed in. The proposed constitutional reform did not even mention religion. However, the Venezuelan Bishops came out against the reform with a letter in October. And the Venezuelan Evangelical Council also came out with a letter rejecting the reform. Each letter was similar, rejecting the concentration of power, the move from democracy to socialism, and affirming the need for pluralism.<sup>16</sup>

### **Go Slow Centralization (2008-?)**

The failure of constitutional reform in December of 2007 left the government with a quite different, as yet entirely clear engagement of popular participation. President Chavez has said that the government's strategy is to work in the same direction only slower—in other words, they still see themselves as trying to construct a new hegemony through centralization of the revolution, only in slow motion. There is still an impressive flow of resources towards participatory initiatives. This of course is one means of control the government has at its disposal. But there are a number of characteristics that suggest the goal of centralizing participation will not be successful.

1. Weak state capacity. At least since the onset of oil exploitation, the Venezuelan state has had an enviable amount of resources. Nevertheless, it has always had difficulties in the effectiveness of policy implementation. The historical reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper but corruption, inefficiency and disarray have been constants within the government during Venezuela's democratic period and continue unabated. From within the government this

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<sup>16</sup> Consejo Evangélico de Venezuela. "Comunicado de Prensa." November 16, 2007.

inefficiency and disarray make the idea of a totalitarian state hard to even imagine among bureaucrats who feel more like they have a tiger by the tail than a dog on a leash.<sup>17</sup>

2. Existing legal structures. The attempt at constitutional reform was not just a whim. There are aspects of the 1999 constitution that really do conserve a structure and autonomy for participatory initiatives from the Executive branch by having their funding and organization run through municipalities. And those are among the articles that the reform sought to change. There is still the possibility that some of these changes will take place since through July 2008 the legislative process is still under an enabling law.<sup>18</sup>
3. Strength of civil society. It may seem strange to make this argument since it is common place in Venezuela studies to point out the weakness of civil society. But there are a couple of dimensions of its articulation that make it resistant to a hegemonic project.

A) On the one hand, *pre-existing forms of civil society* such as neighborhood associations, new social movements and religious groups are still strong. They are willing to collaborate when their interests overlap but are not easily molded beyond that.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, they have the experience and knowledge to know how to take advantage of existing opportunities such as the CCs. So for example, community organizer Elias Santana, at times a central player in the opposition

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<sup>17</sup> Carlos Waisman. 2002. "Civil Society, State Capacity, and the Conflicting 'Logics' of Economic and Political Change," *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de America Latina y el Caribe*. Vol.13, No.1; López Maya 2008, op.cit.

<sup>18</sup> Elias Santana, December 24, 2007. "¿Constitución o Habilitante?," *El Nacional*"; López Maya 2008, op.cit.

<sup>19</sup> García-Guadilla 2007. *El Poder Popular Y La Democracia Participativa En Venezuela: Los Consejos Comunales*. Paper presented at the XXVII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), 2007. Montreal, Canada; Smilde 2004, op.cit.

movement, has fully embraced the CCs and other participatory forms of the government giving workshops, running discussion group, and providing consulting services on citizen participation. As a result many of the most successful CCs are in affluent neighborhoods that do not represent conduits for government control.

B) On the other hand, the popular organization unleashed by the process of change over the past ten years has come fundamentally through a discourse of participatory democracy. Grassroots participants and the brokers and liaisons that work in the government still speak primarily through an idiom of community-level autonomy and initiative that only with great difficulty is combined with centralizing, hegemonic logic. During 2007 this hegemonic logic strengthened as many of these activists tried to demonstrate their one-minded loyalty to Chavez. But with the reform lost and Chavez no longer appearing invincible this process has largely dissipated as prior discursive and network commitments resurface.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, the participatory regime in Venezuela looks quite different than it did only one year ago. On the one hand, the Chávez government continues to spend money on its citizens and include non-elite sectors in the life of the nation. On the other hand, the movement from “deepening democracy” to “extending democracy” has come at the hands of a government with a clear and ominous intention of implanting a new hegemony. However, in 2008, the success of this hegemonic project seems unlikely.

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<sup>20</sup> López Maya 2008, op.cit.; Fernández 2006, op.cit.