

# Research paper on democracy in venezuela

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



## **Introduction**

In 1998, Hugo Chavez won the elections in Venezuela, a victory that marked the beginning of a reign that would later turn out to be oppressive and retrogressive. A huge bulk of his supporters was won over by his strong attacks of the representative democracy that characterized the regime that was at the helm of the country. He promised to break away from the past which he associated with the wealthy. Hugo Chavez and his movement which was known as Chavismo came up with an alternative system which entailed participatory and protagonist democracy. The implementation of this system began with the convening of a constitutional assembly which came up with a new constitution. With a new legal framework in place in December 1999, the country was set for the societal and political changes. The central theme of the Chavismo policy was the direct participation of the citizens in governance and involvement in public policy (Skidmore 24). The implementation of this policy marked the start of a downward spiral for democracy in Venezuela. During the first phase of Chavez's reign, his main focus was on the disintegration of mobilized opposition. After that, he focused on maintaining a high standing in society while neglecting the delivery of public services. Little has been done to deal with lawlessness under the reign of Hugo Chavez with the efforts being diverted towards punishing those who are opposed to the government. Elections are often held but there is no mechanism to ensure that the elections are conducted in a free and fair manner (Hidalgo 89). Chavez promotes an anti USA foreign policy in addition to curtailing certain freedoms of the citizenry. Scholars and civil activists regard the reign of Chavez as a period in which the law has

been neglected, party systems have weakened, the government institutions have weakened and the society has become highly polarized. This paper shall examine not only both sides of the argument thus delve into the question as to whether Chavez has strengthened or weakened the democracy in Venezuela.

## **Implementation of Chavismo and its impacts**

In late 2001, Hugo Chavez faced opposition from the citizens marked by street protests that had only been seen in the 1950's prior to their occurrence. The ratings also indicated that the president was largely unpopular among the citizens. The period between 2002 and 2003 was marked by about 22 massive protests against the Chavez regime. There was a strike in the oil sector which paralyzed not only the industries in the nation but also threatened the economy of the country. Hugo Chavez was angered by the opposition directed towards him hence he took extreme measures to curb it. He sought to push his adversaries into a corner in order to force the citizens to pick a side. Those who went on strike in the oil sector were fired (Penfold-Becerra 67).

Chavez reverted to insulting his opponents and openly using expletives whenever he addressed them in public. Social services were politicized by the end of 2003 in order to utilize them as a tool for the manipulation of the electorate. Missions were formed and the government was largely involved in controlling them. These missions were an alternative to welfare services hence they permeate the social programs in education, health and mobilization of the citizens. Studies have shown that these missions are rarely neutral hence they are used for the manipulation of the citizens

towards embracing Chavismo policies (Rodríguez 54). The voting process was also interfered with. Six months prior to the 2004 referendum, there was a massive registration of voters which was sponsored by the government. The government expedited the process of registering the Columbian voters leading to mass registration of questionable legitimacy. There was a surge in the number of registered voters by a whopping 11. 7%. In order to complement this strategy, the Chavez government sowed seeds of doubt among those in the opposition in regard to the impending elections. His goal was to create dissension, apathy and encourage those who supported the opposition to abscond the elections. The National Electoral Council objectivity was completely eroded with the presence of biased officials within its ranks. Calls for the resignation of these officials were largely ignored. A special set of quasi partisan adherents such as the Bolivian Circles was created and charged with the duty of watching over citizens, defend the government, and intimidate those who were opposed to the government (Human Rights Watch 24). This instilled fear among the voters who were afraid that the elections would be null and voting for their candidate of choice would have negative repercussions. The right to choose was no longer an option for the citizens. Democracy became an illusion which the citizens could no longer attain.

As a protest to the repressive measures that had been taken by the government, the political parties decided to act. In 2005 they called for a boycott of the election in order to get the international community to intervene and restore the much needed democratic space. The Chavez government refused to heed their calls hence proceeded with the elections.

A new parliament was constituted in which the opposition which previously held 45% of the seats was deliberately left out. With that, the government had autonomy over the types of policies that were implemented. Most of the policies were to the government's benefit but detrimental to the citizens (Kornblith 130).

The Chavez administration has to a large extent been marked by instability within the cabinet. This has become evident in the high turnover of the ministers within the government. In the period between 1999 and 2008, Chavez has had 6 vice presidents, 9 interior ministers, 12 secretaries of the presidency, 7 ministers of infrastructure, and 6 ministers of health. The high turnover rates are most evident in the oil sector where the production levels are at their lowest levels but the employment rates keep going up each year. 2007 was marked by shortages of key commodities in addition to visible cracks in provision of urban services, health, education, and policing (Human Rights Watch 24).

The media in Venezuela has had its freedom curtailed under Chavez regime with an aim of advancing his oppressive views. Before the reign of Chavez, the media enjoyed its freedoms. Television and radio outlets have been intimidated, harassed, and bought out by the government. For instance, Radio Caracas Television is one of the stations that have been bought out by the government. This was after the government failed to renew its license forcing the station to close down. Following the closure of the station, the government took over the stations over 60 national transmitters. The state run Televisora Venezolana Sociales began to use the frequency of the RCTV 2 frequency to air. The vast resources that were at the disposal of Hugo

Chavez were regularly used to reward the media organizations. Research has shown that papers that are aligned to Hugo Chavez are likely to receive 12 times more advertising from the government as compared that those that are in opposition to Hugo Chavez. State funds have largely been used in the creation of radio, television and print outlets that promote the Chavez government while sharply criticizing and sidelining those who are opposed to him (Human Rights Watch 32).

The Chavez government has been characterized by exaggerated spending in addition to a release of surplus funding without the approval from the parliament. The Venezuelan government has provisions for a special stabilization account into which surplus funds from the approved budget ought to be directed. Chavez has taken advantage of this clause by handing over budgets that understate the price of oil and ignoring the provision for directing surplus funds generated from the sale of oil into the stabilization fund. For instance, the 2008 budget quoted the price of oil per barrel as \$35 yet the oil was selling at \$116, 233% higher than the quoted price (Rodríguez 51). In doing so, funds that are aimed at development of Venezuela have largely been diverted and by extension the provision of social amenities by the government continues to deteriorate.

Under the reign of Hugo Chavez, Venezuela has become more and more militaristic. Nine of the possible 30 cabinet position are held by retired or active army officers. Eight out of twenty four govern ship positions are currently held by military officers. This makes Venezuela the most military run state in the whole of Latin America. The military spending has gone up seven times what it previously was with the purchase of weapons being

speeded up. Between 2004 and 2007, the government spent \$4.4 billion shillings in the importation of arms in spite the fact that there was no impending threat on the nation. This amount is equivalent to a sum that would be required to build 2 sports stadiums, 300 new schools, 19 super hospitals and 34 medical schools. The military under the reign of Chavez is not a neutral protector of the country's interests but a tool used by him to attain his goals. This loss in autonomy means that Venezuela is under his control hence cannot stand to oppose him in any way (Kornblith 126).

For some citizens, the radical approach by Hugo Chavez towards democracy is justified. It is viewed as a means of empowering the poor given that Venezuela has high rates of poverty and inequality hence the need for the redistribution of wealth among the citizens. The Bolivian revolution according to this school of thought is enhancing equality and the participation of the citizens in governance (Kornblith 134). The impact of the revolution outlined above contravenes this view therefore leading to the conclusion that Chavez has weakened democracy in Venezuela. With the fragmentation of government institutions, loss of autonomy by the military and loss of media freedoms, democratic space in Venezuela has become scarce. There is therefore need for a change in the approach taken by Chavez.

## **Works Cited**

Hidalgo, Manuel. " Hugo Chavez's " Petro-socialism". " Journal of Democracy Volume 20, Number 2 April 2009 (April 2009): 79-91.

Human Rights Watch. A Decade Under Chávez: Political Intolerance and Lost Opportunities. New York: Human rights watch , 2006.

Kornblith, Miriam. " The Referendum in Venezuela: Elections versus

<https://assignbuster.com/research-paper-on-democracy-in-venezuela/>

Democracy,","." Journal of Democracy (2005): 124-137.

Penfold-Becerra, Michael. "" Clientelism and Social Funds: Evidence from Chávez's Misiones." Latin American Politics and Society (2009): 63-84.

Rodríguez, See Francisco. "" An Empty Revolution: The Unfulfilled Promises of Hugo Chavez." Foreign Affairs (2007): 49-62.

Skidmore, Thomas E. Modern Latin America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.