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Cuba and Venezuelan Socialism in 21st century

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The world has witnessed various revolutions over the years. An activity or a movement, which results into fundamental changes in social, economic and political situations, can be termed as a revolution. There are numerous revolutions, which have either failed or succeeded in achieving the intended objectives to initiators and generations thereafter. 20th century is one of the most influential centuries in human history when there were numerous revolutions.

One such revolution which took place was in the form of the rise of Socialism which first came into effect in Russia after the Czar of Russia was overthrown by the socialist revolutionaries. Socialism has seen its share of ups and downs. Socialism rose in a number of countries and became the mainstay of national politics like Russia etc. In other countries, like India, it was present but could not make a significant impact due to lack of popular support while in countries like USA it could not get even a minor foothold owing to the two party political system. The ups were many in the initial decades and the spectacular rise of socialism can only be equated with its unequivocal fall. The failure of USSR and consequent disbandment of the union was only the starting of the end of socialism. Soon it was relegated to the history books and a handful of countries where it was kept alive as if on life support. And just when everyone had begun to write it off completely, it rose like a phoenix in the 21st century in the countries of Cuba and Venezuela which welcomed socialism in its new avatar. Many researchers of the socialism

campaign of the 21st century prefer to treat the word “ socialism” as a misnomer (Iran & Nicaragua, 1990). Hence, the ‘ socialism’ that we talk of in this paper does not involve the political aspect but seeks to examine the term in the aspects of their style, rhetoric and actions. This paper takes only as broad overview of the topic, highlighting the major aspects without delving to the possible in depth analysis that could have been possible in a work of lesser scope.

Cuba & Its Tryst with Socialism

Whenever Socialism is thought of in regard to the Western Hemisphere, Cuba is mentioned in the same breath. Notably, however, Cuban socialist revolution preceded the present socialism wave, which seems to be sweeping many nations, and possesses some basic differences (Winn, 2006).

In 1950’s, Cuba was one of key countries where social-economic revolutions took place successfully. The Cuban people become rebellious with the aim of enhancing better social development and gain independence against foreign domination. The citizens called for the enforcement of the 1940 constitution, which stated that Cuba could be a democratic country free for foreign domination, which the voice of the people will be used in all aspect of governance and economic management of their country (Rosenberg, Kincaid & Logan, 1992).

The invasion of United States into Cuba marks one of most influential history, which shapes current situation, in the country. The Cuban constitution was amended such that United States was give allowed to legally interfere with internal affairs of the country.

Led by Eduardo Chibas and his protégé Fidel Castro, a political party was formed which identified itself to be nationalist, anti – imperialist and socialist in mandate. Fidel Castro started up war in the country and took over the leadership when Batista fled the country when it was beyond his control. He usurped power in 1959 after his July 26th Movement succeeded in overthrowing the Batista regime. It is noble to outline some of key factors, which lead to the revolution before analyzing its failures and success (Iran & Nicaragua, 1990). Five factors lead to the social revolution in Cuba. First, the country depended on capitalist countries for development. This implied that they were limited to the number and size of support and development partnership under the military dictatorship at that time. Secondly, the country was personalized in that the dictatorship alienated people depending on their status in the society. Thirdly, the political culture of founding fathers of the country installed a sense of struggle and nationalism among the people. The other factor, which influenced the spirit of the revolution, was the economics down turn experienced in the country. Lastly, the people wanted a better system of the government which would open up the country to rest of the world.

Fidel Castro who rose to power were helped majorly by Ernesto ‘ Che’ Geuvara who disappointed by the poverty and hunger in Latin America went along with the brothers to help them in their uprising. He went on to become the second in command in Cuba and the prime diplomat globally representing Cuban Socialism. He left Cuba in 1965 to encourage similar revolutions first in Congo and then in Bolivia. He was captured by the Bolivian forces and executed summarily thereby becoming a martyr for the

cause of socialism (Temkin, 1996).

However, after Castro took over the leadership of the country, he initiated changes, which were to reduce or zero rate the influence of United States, in the affairs of the country. United States withdrew its interest and support it had to the country. Initially, Castro was unwilling to embrace socialism in public, preferring to be a behind the scene supporter.

It was only after the Bay of Pigs incident in 1961, when a US supported armed uprising failed miserably, that Castro who had been reluctant in adopting socialism, publicly announced his intentions to do so and started strengthening his ties with the Soviet Union. The failed invasion led to public embarrassment for John F. Kennedy, the then US President and led the socialist movement and Castro himself to gain more popularity than what they already had (Wilpert, 2007). This led to the covert Operation Mongoose which was a covert terrorist operation by the US government to overthrow the communist forces in power. The only option to Castro was to approach USSR for support. This changed the political, social and economic as USSR was in support of communism unlike the capitalist ideology of US. In 1990s, USSR corrupted, which left Cuba at a narrow edge on where to run for help. The US was not ready to renew their relation and hence the Castro had to look for an alternative. Hugo Chavez, the Venezuela's president came into Castro's rescue where they trade in oils and doctors (Winn 2006). The Cuban Missile crises in 1962 brought to the fore, the unity of Soviet Union and Cuba against USA and got the US to publicly agree that it would never again invade Cuba. The deal, however, failed to lift the embargo that US had put on Cuba and had it not been for USSR initially and after its disbanding

Venezuela who supplied oil to Cuba in exchange for its doctors the socialist government in Cuba would have fallen in a few years time. Castro who initially appeared reluctant to embrace Communism, later attributed his Marxism-Leninism to be a result of both will and circumstances as a result of forced dependence on the then Soviet Union following steadfast opposition from USA (Abouchar, 1979)

Success of Socialism in Cuba

Achievements of the Cuban revolution can be used to demonstrate how successful the revolution was to the people. It is established that Cuba revolution is among the few that have achieved the intended objectives by far. The first indicator of the successful of the revolution was the rate of unemployment was wiped out by the year 1990. This is an impressive, and a real outcome of the revolution as unemployment rate was the lowest in Latin America. This is a positive achievement, considering Cuba was among the countries with the highest level of unemployment, which was a motivating factor to the revolution. Other economic factors such as rent, medical care and education, were also some of key achievement accredited to the revolution (Rees, 2004).

Today the infant mortality in this country is 16. 8 per thousand infants. This is far much better compared to 126. 9 and 18. 1 in Haiti and African-American, in United States. Live expectancy for Cuban citizens improved from 57 to 73. 5 years from the year 1958 to 1983. Health care in the country is emulated by many countries across the world as is superior in nature over the years since the revolution (Cannon, 1981).

Social cohesiveness and reduced disorders are the other fruits of the 1950s

revolution in Cuba. The country has the most preferred racial harmony than any other country in the American continent. Respect for all its citizens and foreigners in the country provides offers the country the higher order of social unity. Crime rate in the country is the lowest in the world, where citizens and visitors are safe in all streets and at all times around the clock. Rape is very rare in the country, and it is clear that human dignity and gender respect are key guiding principles for the Cuban people since revolution. This gives the hope for the future and assists in sustaining social justices for all. This is contrarily to numerous third world countries, which are characterized with tribalism, racialism and crime of the highest order including rape and robbery with violence in broad day right (Temkin, 1996). Despite all the positive outcomes of the revolutions which makes it a success. Some issues can be associated with a failed revolution. The centre and system of power after the revolution was not the best for the Cuban people. Power was concentrated within a specific point where Fidel Castro acted as the head of government, the president of the council of the state and the head of the ruling communist party for 48 years. There was no room for opposition in the country while citizens had no strong voice in the country. Young Communist League, Confederation of Cuba Federation of Women and Student association reduced popular participation in the Cuba (Crozier, 1987).

Foreign relations are the other area through which the revolution may be termed as a failure. A lot of criticism on how the foreign affairs of the country were run made it clear that the revolution did not result into the intended foreign relationship. The aim of the people was to see the country

independent from foreign countries' influence in its social economic affairs. As a result, the government formed after revolution sidelined United States with the claim that it manipulated various issues in the country. Little of it was known that Cuba just shifted from United States to Soviet Union. This was highly exposed in the year 1990, when the communist government ended and Soviet Union claimed a \$ 13 billion as a debt it offered to the communist government (Iran & Nicaragua 1990).

And here is where the difference between Cuban Socialism and Venezuela's socialist movement becomes evident. Whereas Cuba is often viewed as a puppet of the erstwhile U. S. S. R., Venezuela has embraced socialism on its own. Cuba was forced to rely on the Soviet Union to keep itself afloat during many crises that it experienced over the decades. These crises led to the uniting of the Cuban population and no strong opposition ever built up against Fidel Castro. The Cuban education system has been the biggest beneficiary of this socialist regime with Cuban free education system ensuring that Cuban professionals are being sought after world over (Rees, 2004). It is this educational system which has churned out great doctors some of whom were 'exported' to Venezuela in return for oil as mentioned earlier. However, the human rights violations, especially the recent incident where many gay Cubans were sent to work camps forcibly, have rendered Castro himself apologetic (Crozier, 1987). The regular exile and imprisonment of political dissidents only goes to show that this is a means of quelling repressions. In spite of these short comings, Fidel Castro continues to enjoy majority support from the Cuban population.

With U. S. S. R. no longer in a position to support Castro, he has begun

softening his stand off late. He ceded some political powers to his brother and initiated some reforms to prevent Cuban economy from failing. With the ever changing situation in Cuba and the recent thaw in US Cuban mutual relations, it is becoming increasingly difficult to predict the future of Cuba.

Hugo Chavez’s “ Socialism of the 21st century”

Venezuela was a democratic state where leaders were accorded the power to lead the people through democratic election. In 1989, Carlos Perez was elected the president of the country after promising the people that he was to oppose the influence of United States in the country’s affairs. After his elections he was not in a position to maintain the economy as a result of lack of funds and support from key states such as US (Winn 2006). As a result, the per capita income dropped while cost of living was substantially high. Hugo Chavez promised to establish a new republic with better living condition for the people. He was elected into power in the year 1998, as the president.

In 2005, at the Fifth Global Social Forum, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez made an announcement that he would be leading his country towards the “ Socialism of the 21st century”. The world was surprised the Venezuelan president announced the country was to change from capitalism to socialism. It was taken as a joke to many as the announcement took place on year 2005, in the 21st century when many countries had already changed from socialism to capitalism through liberalization of economic activities (Janicke, 2007). The oppressed masses of Venezuela lauded their president while the rest of the world balked at this statement.

When Chavez first attempted to usurp control of Venezuela in a coup in 1992

against the then President Carlos Perez, he along with his Bolivarian Revolutionary Army was unsuccessful. Soon thereafter, Chavez was elected President of Venezuela, garnering an impressive 56.2 percent of the vote with an anti corruption election manifesto. He claimed that he aimed at establishing socialism, which would enhance solidarity, love, justice and liberty among the people. He also noted that socialism will enhance equity among the people and reduce exploitation of some members of the society by other. Capitalism as a system allowed private ownership and control of economic process, which according to Venezuelan president; it should not be the case as it leads to unfair distribution of the national wealth. A section of the society owned substantial amount of wealth and hence they are in opposition to dominate others in various aspects (Cannon, 1981). Capitalism allows for private control of distribution of economic commodities in an economy. In this case, discrimination among those in need of these resources leads to conflicts among the members of the society. Open competition among participants in a given industry lead to unwanted competitive strategies. This is unethical but highly practices in many capitalistic countries. Profit maximization and greedy are dangerous applied in such economies. Lastly, capitalism is associated with dysfunction in various aspect of the economy. This is because of the fact that private sector under capitalism, concentrates on profitable undertaking and forgets about the sum of essential and necessities, in the society. This implies that Venezuelans are completely satisfied (Cannon, 1981).

However, it is interesting to see whether over a decade since his announcement, President Chavez has managed to live up to his promise or

not. There are both points of success and failure associated with the move to introduce new socialism in Venezuela (Wilpert, 2007).

The creation of cooperatives is an influential factor which demonstrated the will and determination of the government to introduce the spirit of socialism in the country. The government assisted in the establishment of more than 100, 000 cooperatives in the year 2005. This was a tremendous increase as, in the year 1998; there were only 800, cooperatives in the country. It is, also establishment, about 1. 5 million people works in these cooperative. This figure implies that about 10 percent of adult working class have been absorbed and are working under cooperatives. Training programs in the country have also been intensified to ensure that people are informed and understand the need of cooperatives under the new socialism system (Cannon, 1981).

The management of key industries in the country has been taken over by the government. Through such moves, the government has increase the number of state owned enterprises and use them to influence various aspects in the economy. Some key examples of state management enterprises include the electricity and aluminium companies. The government is in the process to acquire more companies and convert them from private ownership to co-managed enterprises.

Revival of sleeping and dormant companies and factories is the other key successful undertaking by the government in make socialism a reality. Some of key areas, where the government has revived operation are in production of paper, valves and agricultural products. It is also confirmed that the

government aims at other 700 production units, which have closed their operation for various reasons. This will significantly increased the public control on the economy, which is commonly associated with socialism system.

Constitutional reform is the other key sign of success in the introduction of socialism ideology. Under the leadership of President Hugo Chavez, the constitution was amended to allow socialism to replace the capitalism social-economic system. This implies that the president had the power of the constitution that makes it legally and socially acceptable to introduce the system. The implementation of the ideology is official legal and hence opposition has been reduced greatly (Denis, 2006).

There are three points which make the socialism revolution be termed as a failed process. The concept of changing ownership from private to public owned has reduced the country's production level significantly. This is, because of the factor that private owned companies are highly productive due to efficiency and the need for competition. Reduced production leads to reduced supply of goods and services, which eventually to increased prices of goods and services as the market fry to settle at the equilibrium. This has started raising issues to many people in Venezuela, which is likely to trigger an immense opposition.

The government lacks efficiency and credibility as far as many aspects is concerned. The number of companies, requiring government attention for decision-making and management have increased beyond it capacity. The government has not been in a position maintaining quantity and quality standards maintained by private management. Production function seems to

be worse than it used to under the capitalist system (Wilpert, 2006).

Lastly, socialism system has led to souring foreign relation of the country.

This is because of the fact that the government, which controlled almost every aspect of the economy, closed opportunities for foreign investment which kept so many countries away. Countries that used to be developed partners under the capitalist system had no room in the countries affairs unless it was a matter of necessity. Foreign income and balance of trade soured after the introduction of socialism (Winn 2006).

According to a report from the Centre for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, USA, real GDP of Venezuela has grown by 94. 7% in just over five years, cutting poverty by more than 50 percent and extreme poverty by 72 % (Azzellini, 2006).

Inequality of wealth has been greatly reduced, and public facilities of healthcare and public education have progressed drastically; for example, clean water access has increased 12 % from 1998, and access to sanitation facilities by 20 % within the same time frame (Grant & Brue, 2007).

Averaging more than 13 % since 1998, rate of unemployment fell to less than 10 % for the first time in the year 2007. Most impressive of all, these figures were made possible while decreasing the fiscal deficit from 30. 7 % of the GDP in 1998 to 14. 3 % in 2008 (Grant & Brue, 2007).

Though Chavez seems to have achieved the impossible overcoming several obstacles, several problems still persist. The Corruption Perceptions Index has climbed steadily over the past decade and the present ranking of Venezuela is as poor as possible; not to mention the repression of the opposition by Chavez. The critics of Chavez and other Latin American leaders

with Leftist viewpoints use data like this and cite human rights violations and repressions of democracy in all countries which have embraced socialism as their own. Even though Venezuela has become increasingly polarized under Chavez's rule, he still enjoys the support of a majority of Venezuelans as is evident from his restoration to power following the coup in 2002 and his winning of the 2006 election by garnering 63% of the electoral vote.

Economically, the Venezuelan economy has expanded majorly due to its petroleum exports. In fact, researchers across the globe have observed that the Venezuelan economy would have failed but for the oil exports. Thus, Venezuela must diversify its oil based economy and avoid the present course of action that it has employed for its growth. A jolt to the current oil export based growth pattern could reverse Chavez's political fortune and rapidly erode his massive popularity. Presently however, Chavez continues to enjoy the success of his exploits and continues to help other world leaders in their endeavour to achieve similar success.

Where Will the Twenty First Century Lead Us?

The fall of socialism in Soviet Union seemed to reinforce the belief that capitalism was the only right ideology. However, recent events in Europe and United States have shaken up every one. This combined with the rise and the success of socialist parties, in Europe and Latin America, has put the capitalist system under a lot of strain. In recent elections in Latin American nations more radical leaders with socialist ideas are coming to the fore, but the current regime of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela is attracting everyone's attention. The question whether old socialism is making a comeback or whether a new socialism is coming to the fore remains to be answered. Even

before the ascension of Chavez to power, Venezuela was influenced by socialistic ideas (Reform and Revolution, 2006). However, it was Chavez, who made socialism the mandate of the government. (Wilpert, 2006).

Aiming for ‘ zero misery’ (Rosenberg, 2007), Chavez lays forth his motive to be the guardian angel of the poor people. He aims to transform Venezuela into a ‘ Global Player’ (Glüsing, 2006) while attempting to alleviate the standard of living of the poor in Cuba by enhancing education and investing in social programs and letting the poor have more say in the political proceeding of Cuba. Though these claims may seem novel to poverty stricken people, nonetheless, Chavez’s promises and visions seem unrealistic for Venezuela, which has made humongous profits from its oil resources since the 1920s. Chavez has sought to change the situation by trying to invest the profits from petroleum sales to better the situation of poor people and not to just maximize profits. As per the observations made in the paper, a lot has changed in Venezuela’s economic, political and society since Chavez ascended to power. The Venezuelan government is now focusing on the expansion of non-private forms of ownership and has introduced a new economic production unit the “ Social Production Enterprises” which downplay the profit making and emphasize on cooperation, reciprocity, equity etc (Janicke, 2007).

All citizens are treated as equals and all businesses run under the state, collective or mixed ownership patterns. The high revenue that Venezuelan government gets through sale of oil is used to finance the socialistic programs. This has reduced the number of people living in extreme poverty by nearly half since 1998 (Wilpert, 2006). Thus as far as ownership and

means of production go, Chavez has transformed Venezuela using socialism. However, the practices followed do raise the question whether this socialism is indeed different from the socialism followed in Cuba and erstwhile U. S. S. R.

Socialism, in its initial avatar, focused on universal togetherness and equality for all, focusing on the moral values of human being. However Chavez, as part of his “ Socialism in the 21st Century” campaign insists on economical convergence of the population rather than other aspects. Since Chavez’s interpretation of socialism neither focuses on worker exploitation nor is built on the premise that labor produces profit hence it can be considered different to the socialism that Marx envisioned. However, the introduction of cooperatives and the similarity in their beliefs that a failed state has to be overthrown to establish socialism tends to show some similarities of their views. Concluding, Chavez has established socialism albeit with changes of his own and even though the new system has a lot of similarities to classic socialism; it has its own inklings which make it quite distinct in its own right (Crozier, 1987).

Both Cuba and Venezuela have a similar story but many different problems. And they have both chosen to deal with their problems differently. While Cuba has sought help from the erstwhile USSR and the Venezuelan governments in times of crises, recently both Fidel and Raul Castro have mellowed down to a large extent and recently there has been a thaw in the Cuban – US relations leaving the world wondering whether socialism will survive in Cuba much longer. On the other hand, Venezuela has reached into its bounty of oil reserves and used the profits gained from oil exports to fuel

its growth and keep socialism alive not only within its borders but has also fomented the sowing of seeds of socialism in many other Latin American countries.

Conclusion

A revolution is not a simple undertaking as the word may sound. A complex process calls for an effective planning and a sense of determination. Cuba represents a tangible example of a country that enjoys the fruit of a social – economic revolution. Many aspects changed for the better, which makes the process to be successful in nature. On the other hand, Venezuela, under the leadership of Hugo Chavez has tried to adopt the socialism system, but it has not yet realized the intended objectives. There have been historical examples to show that the dreams of a single man have been enough to build and sustain an empire/nation for their lifetimes but things tend to go awry with their deaths. Famous examples of the same are Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun and many more. On the other hand, leaders like Lenin & Stalin have left in their wake a strong second line of leadership. The Cuban leader Fidel Castro has in many ways groomed his brother Raul as the second in command but Hugo Chavez has failed to do so. What repercussions will this have on their respective nations, only time shall tell. The influence of the two leaders will continue to be felt in their countries. They are highly respected and revered leaders across the world as they tried to fight throughout their lives to ensure that the desire they had to see their citizens have a better live. Their contribution will remain in mind of their citizens while they history will stay for long and referred to for years to come.

Leaders like Hugo Chavez tend to believe that their revolution will sweep the world but this is a belief which will be repudiated over time. Despite the immense success that this new movement has seen in its respective territories, the sustainability shall only be shown with time. Socialism has reared its head again in the 21st century, albeit in a different avatar than its twentieth century counterpart existent in some countries. Whether it will survive the test of time is something that will be a part of history books many decades from now.

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