

Democratization



Year 2, Issue 5

Authoritarian resilience and
the venezuelan democratic cause:
resources and asymmetries

Elsa Cardozo

The blockade of the legislative
and comptroller functions of the National
Assembly by the Supreme Tribunal of Justice:
an introduction

Carlos García Soto

The Chavista regime sits comfortably
on the bayonets of its Armed Forces

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

JANUARY 2020

The Chavista regime sits comfortably on the bayonets of its Armed Forces

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

The Chavista revolution was born in the Venezuelan barracks, and the National Bolivarian Armed Forces (FANB) are today one of its main props to maintain hold of power. The civic-military alliance promoted by Hugo Chávez and continued by Nicolás Maduro is a four-legged table upheld by the partisanship of the FANB, the presence of officers in the executive, the creation of a military business network and excessive corruption.

Constitutional and legal modifications have allowed the ruling party to tailor the Armed Forces to its political interests. The Magna Carta of 1999, promoted by Chávez, recognizes the right of active militaries to vote and includes “active participation in national development” among the objectives of the institution.

This fundamental text lays the foundations of the civic-military alliance by establishing in article 326 that the security of the nation is based on the co-responsibility between the State and civil society, adding that this principle is exercised upon the economic, social, political, cultural, geographic, environmental and military spheres.

The failed project to reform the Constitution, rejected by the majority of Venezuelans in 2007, intensified the partisanship of barracks. It proposed changing the name of the National Armed Forces to the National Bolivarian Armed Forces, described as an “essentially patriotic, popular and anti-imperialist body”, and it claimed “its active participation in plans designed for the economic, social, scientific and technological development of the nation”.

The proposal drafted by the ruling party not only altered its name, but also shook the structure of the Armed Forces by incorporating the National Bolivarian Militia as a fifth force, together with the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and the National Guard, turning it into a force basically constituted by militants of Chavismo.

Despite the fact that Venezuelans rejected the initiative submitted to a referendum, Chávez and Maduro still made these additions by changing several laws. The president of the NGO Control Ciudadano para la Seguridad, la Defensa y las Fuerzas Armadas¹, Rocío San Miguel, has adverted that the Organic Law of the FANB has undergone six reforms in 15 years, definitively divorcing it from the Constitution.

The last modification was approved on January 28, 2020, by the National Constituent Assembly, an organ declared illegal by the Venezuelan Parliament, the United States, the European Union and the Organization of American States. The text in question adds the National Bolivarian Militia as the fifth component of the FANB, defines it as “special” and stipulates that it depends on the President of the Republic and Commander in Chief of the

1 Citizen Control for Security, Defense and the National Armed Forces.

FANB. Furthermore, it specifies that the institution is based on anti-imperialist and anti-oligarchic values.

Green and red

More than military, militants. The military leaders do not hide their sympathy for the Chavista project. On the contrary, they exhibit it loudly and clearly. “Bolivarian soldier, determined and convinced to continue building the socialist homeland!” is the biography of the Minister of Defense, general-in-chief, Vladimir Padrino López on Twitter, while the head of the FANB’s Strategic Operational Command, Admiral Remigio Ceballos Ichaso, proclaims: “Chávez lives, the nation carries on². Bolivarian, Zamoran and socialist”.

That loyalty and identification with the ruling party are reflected in the composition of the Executive Cabinet. Control Ciudadano indicates that, currently, almost a third of the ministries (29.41%) is in the hands of the military. In November 2017, that figure increased to 43.75% while since 2014 the average has been 32.68%.

It is not only a matter of quantity. Senior FANB officers control key positions in the Public Administration. Bolivarian National Guard General Manuel Quevedo occupies the Ministry of Oil and Petroleum of Venezuela (PDVSA), the core of the battered Venezuelan economy. At the moment, ministries such as Food, Agriculture and Land, Interior and Justice, Ecological Mining Development, Habitat and Housing, and Public Works are under the baton of uniformed personnel.

² Popular phrase, frequently chanted by the FANB. In Spanish, “Chávez vive, la patria sigue”.

In July 2016, Maduro appointed the head of Defense as chief of the Great Mission for Safe Supply to combat food shortages and stated: “All ministers and all State institutions are under the orders and absolute subordination of the National Command of the Great Mission for Safe Supply, under the command of the President of the Republic and under the command of the general-in-chief Vladimir Padrino López” (own translation).

Between 2012 and 2016, 52% of governors came from barracks, according to Control Ciudadano. The figure dropped to 30% during the 2017-2021 period with three former Defense incumbents: Chief Generals Jorge Luis García Carneiro and Henry Rangel Silva, and Admiral Carmen Meléndez Rivas.

On December 11 2015, Maduro declared: “I have given an order to implement a well-thought-out, detailed plan, so that the comrades who have provided their services to the nation from the Public Administration return to their command posts and to active ranks in each component. It is time to return to the force to inspire more union” (own translation). Nonetheless, the olive green presence today is not limited to ministries and governments, but is visible in all kinds of organizations and missions completely unrelated to their training and experience.

Uniformed S.A.

As the structure of the Venezuelan State is figured out, a business network that responds directly to the FANB has been built.

Article 25 of the FANB Law, approved by the Constituent Assembly preceded by Captain Diosdado Cabello, addresses the concept of “special military-economic zone” in these terms:

“The President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Commander-in-chief of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces may decree the creation of special military-economic zones, defined as the geographical space where potentialities, general and special conditions are identified and located to carry out endogenous, sustainable and productive activities led by the National Bolivarian Armed Forces in a civic-military union, in order to meet their basic needs, contribute to the strengthening of the military industry and national development, within the sphere of influence of the Axes of Strategic Economic Development established by the National Executive” (own translation).

When installing a military-economic zone in the Aragua state in May 2019, Maduro said that “the FANB will become an economic power that will benefit not only the military but the people, encouraging national production in perfect civic-military union, at the service of true national development by generating jobs and food” (own translation).

Before Chávez assumed the Presidency of the Republic in 1999, there were only six military companies. Once the Chavista revolution was at full steam, another 13 were created between 2005 and 2017, according to Control Ciudadano. Additionally, the number of foundations, autonomous services, coordinating offices, institutes and funds related to the FANB reaches 20.

Currently, the military has a bank (Banfanb), a construction company (Construfanb), an agricultural company (Agrofanb), a television channel (TVFanb), industrial complexes, transport corporations, vehicles and technology, a tire company, a printing company (Imprefanb), an investment fund called Negro Primero,

and what may be the cherry on top: the *Compañía Anónima Militar para las Industrias Mineras, Petrolíferas y de Gas*³ (Camimpeg).

Camimpeg aims to work with everything related to the lawful activities of oil, gas and mining services in general, as stated in the Official Gazette of February 10, 2016. The website of the Ministry of Defense says that it intends “to be a national and international leading company in oil, gas and mining services, functioning with the highest standards in order to develop the industrial and economic potential, through its optimal use, offered by exhaustible and non-renewable strategic natural resources, autonomously, efficiently and responsible” (own translation).

This allows Maduro to fully engage the military in the most lucrative business that Venezuela offers, whose fate is increasingly tied to the wealth hidden underground.

Corruption pattern

The NGO Transparencia Venezuela affirms that the Bolivarian Republic has become the prototype of “great corruption”, since throughout these 21 years of the Chavista regime, decisions taken and public policies applied have led to the constitution of a “criminal state”.

The investigation has identified twelve elements that map out the pattern of “great corruption”. One of them is civic-military control: “In Venezuela, there is a strong military presence in the State and in all spheres of public action. Militaries run State-owned companies, governorates, embassies, and ministries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights even affirmed,

3 Anonymous Military Company for the Mining, Oil and Gas Industries

in July 2019, that the country had increased the militarization of State institutions. This group has expanded its participation in businesses where there is a greater risk of corruption” (own translation), warns Transparencia Venezuela.

The first major case of corruption that the Chavista regime faced had high-ranking military leaders as protagonists: Plan Bolívar 2000, a social program launched to combat poverty. Since then, practically all scandals caused by the looting of the public treasury have mixed two factors: dollars and epaulettes.

The National Foreign Currency Administration Commission (Cadivi), perhaps the greatest symbol of embezzlement to the nation, was chaired by General Manuel Barroso. Despite all the accusations against him, he was continuously promoted within the FANB until he became a military attaché of the Venezuelan Embassy in Brazil.

The Food ministry, in the eye of the hurricane due to allegations of overpricing, payment of commissions, contraband and other irregularities that would have cost the country billions of dollars, has had 11 military ministers since 2004. General Rodolfo Marco Torres, Carlos Osorio Zambrano and Félix Osorio Guzmán stand out on the list.

Marco Torres, former head of the Economy and current governor of the Aragua state, and Osorio Zambrano, president of the Venezuelan Mining Corporation (CVM), received a political sanction from Parliament for the alleged deviations during their administration periods. Osorio Guzmán is the rector of the Bolivarian Military University of Venezuela and declares himself in his social media as a “patriot, socialist, humanist, anti-imperialist and radically Chavista”.

“Of the six presidents that the State-owned National Electric Corporation (Corpoelec) has had, three have been military personnel with no experience in the area: Major General Hipólito Izquierdo, Lieutenant Jesse Chacón and Major General Luis Motta Domínguez. The power plants have been militarized and even so the government assures that the installations have been victims of sabotage” (own translation), states Transparencia Venezuela. Corruption and inefficiency have left all Venezuelans in the dark, who have suffered the rigors of the electricity crisis for ten years.

However, perhaps the most serious complaint against the FANB has just been ratified by the International Narcotics Control Board, an entity linked to the United Nations, which in its latest annual report reveals: “There are indications that, in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, criminal groups have succeeded in infiltrating government security forces, forming an informal network known as the ‘Cartel of the Suns’ to facilitate the passage of illegal drugs into and out the country”. The name “Soles” refers to the insignia worn by Venezuelan generals on their shoulders.

“Let no one be wrong about the FANB (...) we are the children of Chávez”, exclaimed Padrino López, also sector vice-president of Political Sovereignty, Security and Peace, in his year-end greeting on December 31st, 2019. With their new motto “always loyal, never traitors”, military leaders strengthen their ties with the civilians of Chavismo and keep afloat a regime with which they share principles, power, interests and businesses.

Conclusions

To conclude the fifth issue of *Democratización* magazine, we offer three general considerations.

Firstly, the appearance of COVID-19 among the national and international political scene will affect Venezuela's path to freedom. In the academic and intellectual field, mechanisms that allow to know its real repercussions and to assess its political impact must be created. Overcoming the propaganda of the regime and recognizing the presence of the virus in the country are pressing challenges. In the political field, we consider it urgent to find actions that respond to Professor Cardozo's warning: "that the regime achieves a large margin of international permissiveness and the democratic cause, with little effective external support, remains in an extremely vulnerable situation". It greatly concerns us that the Chavista autocracy may be leveraged in the "good spirit" of a sector of the international community to settle deeper into power and to increase political repression with impunity.

Secondly, the National Assembly elected on December 6, 2015, emerged as the only independent power that had survived the autocratic expansion of the Chavista revolution. Thus, its outbursts were mainly focused towards it. Since its installation, it has been attacked, harassed and dismembered. Still, it remains an oasis in the middle of the desert we live in. Perhaps, the immediate judgment on its performance may be marked by political frustration. Many of us placed the hope of a peaceful and constitutional political change upon it, but that expectation was not met. Carlos García Soto's article offers a set of reasons that explain this. The author identifies and describes the institutional,

moral, and physical attacks against democracy. His analysis is a starting point, as it is an issue that demands in-depth studying. We trust that time will help to evaluate and let us see, with the peace that freedom offers, all the contributions of the members of the National Assembly for the democratic cause.

Thirdly, the regime of Nicolás Maduro relies on force. It is a fierce dictatorship that, although not military, leverages itself in the Armed Forces to cling to power. Pedro Pablo Peñaloza's article identifies the reasons behind the loyalty of the National Bolivarian Armed Forces: the partisanship of the Armed Forces, the presence of officers on the Executive, the creation of a military business network and excessive corruption. In future investigations, it would perhaps be convenient to delve into the first point and the importance of the ideological component. Regarding the reasons that encourage loyalty, we ask ourselves what is more influential: ideological stubbornness or personal enrichment?