

## In Defense of Polyarchy

By Michael Coppedge.

In an interview a few years ago, the political scientist Robert Dahl commented that what troubled him most about his discipline was its inability to settle on a definition of “democracy.” I feel the same way as I write this essay because I think that much of the controversy that permeates this scholarly and political interchange has been generated by semantic differences. We can’t agree about whether the United States can — or should — promote democracy in Latin America, in part because we don’t agree about what democracy is. To some of the contributors to this NACLA Report, “democracy” necessarily means a form of government that either guarantees or progressively moves toward a relatively equal distribution of assets and income and therefore of social status, dignity, political power and personal freedom. In the interests of clarity, I would prefer to call this “social democracy.” To others, “democracy” is a set of institutions and procedures that ensure that effective political decision-makers are chosen in free and fair elections, under conditions in which citizens have access to diverse sources of independent information, can express their political opinions freely, and can organize and join parties and other organizations without fear of government retaliation. This is what Dahl called “polyarchy.”

It confuses matters to appropriate the unrestricted term “democracy” when referring to just the special case of social democracy, especially if in doing so one overlooks abuses of any of the requirements of the highly desirable state of affairs called polyarchy. Polyarchy—properly understood—is a precious achievement. I’m shocked and dismayed to see how quickly many Latin Americans and Latin American scholars have forgotten how much worse it was to live, and how much harder it was to work for social justice, under regimes that came to power by military force rather than via free and fair elections, that disbanded political parties, trade unions and human rights groups, and murdered, disappeared, imprisoned or exiled their leaders. Although some Latin American regimes today still commit some of these abuses, it is not polyarchy that is to

blame, but deviations from polyarchy. In a fully polyarchic regime, such abuses would be rare and people who committed them would be arrested and held accountable.

Now with the benefit of some conceptual clarity, I hope I can restate some allegedly irreconcilable positions in a way that reconciles them. Some of the contributors to this Report believe that the United States tries to promote polyarchy, among other goals, in Latin America, and that this is a laudable undertaking. Others believe that for the most part, the United States actively opposes social democracy in the region, and that this is to be condemned. I agree with both of these statements, and don't think there's any contradiction between them. I also would agree with what I think is a consensual statement: that there is a contradiction in a foreign policy that promotes polyarchy while simultaneously undermining any social democracy that respects the rules of polyarchy, because a commitment to polyarchy requires the United States to accept elected governments that respect political liberties, regardless of their ideological orientation. If we could just agree on these statements, we could get on with the remaining questions: whether the United States *can* and *should* effectively promote polyarchy in Latin America—when, where, and especially, how?

A few Latin American countries today are pretty much full polyarchies. I'd single out Uruguay and Costa Rica, for example. They don't need polyarchy promotion programs, and as far as I know they don't currently get any. But the majority of Latin American countries are imperfect polyarchies, and they tend to be targets of U.S. programs that help to remedy the particular shortcomings they may suffer from: corruption, inefficient judicial systems, lack of specific expertise in military affairs, ineffective election administration agencies, small or poorly trained legislative staff, and weak civil society organizations—including business organizations, the media, labor organizations, indigenous groups, women's groups, and neighborhood associations. These programs may not be effective, but at least they are targeted appropriately. There are some worse cases, such as Haiti, that are cases of state failure, where the emphasis should be on state-

building before democracy promotion. When democracy promotion fails, it's likely to sour citizens on the notion of democracy. This is my most serious criticism of these programs.

Then, there is an intermediate case, Venezuela, in which a different sort of action is appropriate because the regime has ceased to be a full polyarchy. Let me justify this classification because I know it will be controversial on these pages. I recognize that Hugo Chávez, or his candidates or proposals, have won at the polls consistently and repeatedly since 1998 (although if the government had not delayed the recall referendum by more than a year, he would have been voted out in 2003). But polyarchy requires more than winning elections, even though some in the U.S. government sometimes forget this when it suits their purposes. Polyarchy also requires holding *fair* elections, and there have already been some abuses of this in Venezuela: physical intimidation of opposition voters at the polls; preferential registration of likely Chávez voters, including some non-citizens; and possible small-scale electronic fraud. And there are good reasons to believe that future elections will not be fair, if the government needs them not to be fair. There has been proof that voting machines can be used to invalidate the secret ballot if the government wants to do that. There is now an unreasonably partisan electoral council that has repeatedly shown that it does not make fair decisions, and the courts are stacked in a systematic way so that it's impossible to turn to them to appeal these decisions of the electoral council. For all these reasons, there are questions about whether future elections will be fair.

A polyarchy must also guarantee the freedom to speak and organize, but in Venezuela there has been systematic tracking of the loyalties of voters through the "Programa Maisanta" database. And this tracking has already been used to punish opposition sympathizers, firing them from jobs merely because they exercised their constitutional right to petition for the recall of the president under Chávez's own Constitution. Leaders of the most important NGO, Súmate, have been convicted of "conspiracy to destroy the republican political form that has been given to the nation" because they accepted funding from the National

Endowment for Democracy. The opposition mayor of Baruta, Henrique Capriles Radonsky was arrested for inciting violence against the Cuban Embassy, despite television broadcasts showing him trying to tame an angry mob.<sup>i</sup> The government has employed roving bands of thugs to intimidate opposition rallies. A few people have been killed under mysterious circumstances, with impunity for the killers, most notoriously the sniper killings in April 2002.<sup>ii</sup> These are all actions that constrict the freedom of political opposition.

Polyarchy also requires alternative sources of information, and I am the first to acknowledge that Venezuela has a vibrant opposition-dominated press, both broadcast and print media. There have been arrests and intimidation (including death threats) of journalists, however, and some TV talk-shows that are critical of the government have been canceled under government pressure. The Law of Social Responsibility of the Media has been passed, which threatens fines or license revocation for broadcasters who disrespect the government and has induced some self-censorship. It is to the media's credit that they have not been intimidated as much as they could be by some of these measures.

I don't mean to say that Venezuela has a horribly undemocratic regime. It is *not* totalitarian, and it may not even be authoritarian. But there are enough deviations from polyarchy that it cannot be called a full polyarchy. To put things in perspective, it is about as undemocratic as Mexico under the long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). With respect to the criteria for polyarchy, it is a dominant-party regime. When a government is actively working to weaken political opposition, an outside government that wants to promote polyarchy must focus on strengthening that opposition so that it can more effectively challenge the government. This means coming to the aid of both civil society organizations and political parties. Just imagine if the political orientations of these actors were switched, and a conservative government were treating its progressive opposition this way, I think most of the contributors to this symposium would cheer the U.S. government for providing this kind of assistance to opposition groups. And this is basically what the United States has done in Venezuela, through a variety of governmental and quasi-governmental institutions. National

Endowment for Democracy (NED) spending earmarked specifically for Venezuela jumped from \$258,000 in 2000, to over \$1 million in both 2002 and 2003 and measured a little under \$1 million in 2004. These increases were obviously timed to strengthen the opposition drive to recall the president. The percentage of this spending that was allocated to U.S. party institutes increased from less than 20% of the total spending in 2000, to 63% in 2001 and 51% in 2003. Ordinarily, I would say it wouldn't be wise of the United States to focus on short-term political objectives. But the recall effort seemed like a rare and realistic opportunity to help Venezuelans remove an anti-polyarchic government by constitutional means. Nevertheless, the effort failed.

Understanding why it failed can put all these polyarchy promotion efforts in larger perspective. First, it's important to remember that these efforts have been dwarfed by the efforts of other actors. While the NED was spending a bit less than \$1 million in Venezuela in 2004, the Venezuelan government was spending close to \$2 *billion* in patronage and its "missions" to build political support. (By the way, I agree that these programs have brought real benefits to Venezuela's poor majority in the short term. But It is an open question whether they are sustainable enough to provide social democracy in the long term, and whether some other kind of government might have made a better use of Venezuela's oil bonanza.) Furthermore, Venezuela's political history made it an uphill battle for the opposition, which was saddled with the tragic legacy of forty years of corrupt and ineffective two-party alternation in power.

Second, the institutionalized, public polyarchy-promotion programs of the U.S. government are only one arm of its polyarchy promotion effort. There are also the more direct short-term diplomatic pressures, perhaps covert actions seeking to manipulate the course of events in real time. And these efforts, in the case of Venezuela, backfired. When the spokespersons for the Bush administration precipitously recognized and even welcomed the overthrow of Chávez in April 2002, and Condoleezza Rice said that the Chávez government had brought this on itself, the United States' claim to be a promoter of polyarchy lost credibility. By showing its willingness to work with a *junta* that ignored the constitutional line

of succession and tried to disband the National Assembly and the courts and to reverse major legislation by decree, the U.S. made it clear that it had succumbed to the temptation to oppose social democracy even at the expense of polyarchy. Chávez is no paragon of polyarchy, but the coup-installed Carmona government would have been even less democratic.

The longer-term consequence of this has been that, in Venezuela, subsequent US efforts to promote democracy have been counterproductive in some ways. Venezuelan civil society groups that accept U.S. funding, and parties that ally themselves with the United States, have been targeted by the government. Also, Chávez consistently insists that the United States is planning to invade Venezuela, and the United States' clumsy attempts to remove him transform that baseless accusation into a claim that is credible within the pro-Chávez camp and can be used to mobilize young Venezuelans into a two-million-man militia. And this loss of U.S. credibility in Venezuela resonates with events that have brought about the loss of U.S. democratic credibility around the world: the memories of the not-so-distant years when Washington backed authoritarian regimes and worked to overthrow genuinely polyarchic governments of the Left, the bungling of the 2000 presidential elections in the United States, registration laws that restrict electoral participation in the United States, the disproportionate influence of wealthy lobbies, the violation of human rights of resident aliens and the use of torture in Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, among others. So U.S. efforts to promote polyarchy or broader democracy abroad will be handicapped until the United States recovers its credibility, its soft power. Democracy promotion has to begin at home.

---

<sup>i</sup>ProVeO, "Harassment of 'Primero Justicia' Leaders: Henrique Capriles Radonski Case," <<http://www.proveo.org/hcr.pdf>>.

<sup>ii</sup> Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, *Informe Anual 2003*, Chapter IV, paragraph 60 <<http://www.cidh.org/annualrep/2003sp/cap.4b.htm#VENEZUELA>>.