

# THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY: MAKING AN ANOMALY?

BY MARTA HARNECKER  
MONTHLY REVIEW, SEPTEMBER 2003.<sup>1</sup>

Led by Hugo Chávez, a former military officer, a “Bolivarian revolutionary process” has been underway in Venezuela since Chavez’s election to the presidency in 1998. While genuine progressive changes have been made and Chavez has won the enmity of the country’s rich and powerful, this “Bolivarian revolution” has been rejected by some on the left because it is headed by a military man and because the military has played a significant and outstanding role in numerous state institutions and government plans. The reason for this rejection is the standard left wisdom that the military is an integral part of the bourgeois state’s repressive machinery, imbued with a bourgeois ideology, and therefore incapable of playing a revolutionary role in a capitalist society. But perhaps this is a mechanistic interpretation. It might be better to avoid generalizations and analyze each country’s military within its own specific reality. If we take this approach, we see that Venezuela’s military has not played that negative role. During more than four years in which the military has occupied a key space in the Venezuelan political scene, they have defended the decisions made democratically by the Venezuelan people and they were the main actors in supporting Chávez’s return to power when in April 2002 a group of senior officers —most of whom found themselves with no soldiers to lead—knelt before the major interests in a coup attempt.<sup>2</sup>

Military personnel have also headed important social projects organized by the government. They have placed their work capacities, technical skills, and organizational knowledge at the service of the poorest sectors of society. The most important of these undertakings has been Plan Bolivar 2000, a broad program aimed at improving the living standard of the poor, by, among other things, cleaning up streets and schools, improving the environment to fight endemic diseases, and recovering the social infrastructure in both urban and rural areas. The goal of the Plan was to find solutions to social problems while generating employment in the neediest sectors and incorporating community organizations into these efforts.

It is important to note that the Plan was begun during Chávez’s first year in power, when he faced a very unfavorable balance of forces.<sup>3</sup> Most of the country’s governors and mayors were members of the opposition, and the same was true for the national Congress and the Supreme court of Justice.<sup>4</sup> In addition, most of Chávez’s political cadres were then working on the political challenge first of amending the constitution to make it possible to implement his popular mandate and then in a series of elections to renew the mandates.

Chávez’s victory had produced huge popular expectations, and it was necessary to begin immediately to satisfy the people’s aspirations. The only apparatus with a national structure capable of carrying out Chávez’s mission (besides the Catholic Church) was the military.

---

1. This text contains information not included in the Spanish text.

2 It is not very well known that the only putschist senior officers in real positions of command were Ramírez Pérez, head of the Armed Forces General Staff, and Vásquez Velasco, Army commander general. Several retired generals supported the coup, along with only 200 out of 8 000 officers (generals, admirals, colonels, lieutenant colonels, and lower grade officers). Eighty percent of commanding officers participated in the Plan to rescue Chávez, and the number could be higher because at the time of the coup communications were very difficult.

3 The Plan was announced to the country on February 27, 1999, ten years after the Caracazo.

4 Elections for governors and mayors had been held the year before the presidential election.

The Venezuelan armed forces, especially the junior officers, took on these tasks of social reconstruction with enthusiasm. And as they made direct contact with the problems suffered by the very poor, these officers became more socially aware and engaged. The junior officers now belong to the more radical sectors of the process.

This phenomenon, so unusual in Latin America, raises the question: Why has the Venezuelan military given overwhelming support to a process of profound social transformation, becoming deeply engaged in solving the problems of the poorest people? The analysis which follows is based upon recent interviews with nine officers of the Venezuelan armed forces. The interviews and the analysis have recently been published in a book, *Venezuela: Militares Junto al Pueblo*.<sup>5</sup>

A number of factors appear to distinguish Venezuela's military personnel from their Latin American counterparts. First, the country's military has been deeply influenced by the philosophy of Simón Bolívar, the most outstanding figure of Latin America's struggle for independence from Spain. While Bolívar never spoke of class struggle, he did insist on the need to abolish slavery and his work always shows concern for the common people. His major contribution was perhaps his understanding of importance of Latin American integration. He understood very early on that our countries had no future unless they joined in their struggle against European countries and the United States. Already in the second decade of the nineteenth century he foresaw that "in the name of freedom, the United States of North America seem to have been destined by providence to plague America with miseries." He also believed that democracy had to be conceived as a political system to give people supreme happiness. According to him, no military man should ever aim his weapon against the people.

Second, beginning with Hugo Chávez's generation, most of the military's officers were trained not in the infamous School of the Americas (in the United States) but in the Venezuelan Military Academy. In 1971 the Military Academy underwent a radical transformation, the Andrés Bello Plan, which brought it up to university standing. Army cadres began to study political science and to read what had been written about democracy and about Venezuelan reality. In their military strategy classes they studied Clausewitz, the Asian strategists, and Mao Zedong. Students often went to the universities to specialize themselves in specific university subjects and began exchanging their experiences with other college students. If some of them did go on to study at the School of the Americas, they went to the United States well-fortified with progressive ideas.

Third, this generation of military officers never had to face a growing guerilla force as did so many other Latin American military. On the contrary, it was trained in the 1970s, by which time the country had been for all practical purposes pacified and only a few guerilla nuclei remained active. When soldiers patrolled peasant zones in the frontier, what they found was not a guerilla force but poverty. They could see with their own eyes that the ideology so common among Latin American elites—that the poor are poor because they drink, because they have no initiative or will to work, because they are not very intelligent—was false. They came to understand that behind poverty stands a national oligarchy hoarding the nation's riches, along with the United States whose policies sow this poverty throughout the country.

Fourth, there is no discrimination in the Venezuelan armed forces; anyone can reach the highest ranks. There is no military caste as in other countries. Most of the senior officers are sons of poor urban and peasant families, and they know from experience the difficulties their people have to undergo to make a daily living. This does not mean, of course, that because of their humble origins, they are immune to the clever coopting maneuvers of the oligarchy with whom they inevitably

---

<sup>5</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Militares Junto al Pueblo, Vadell hnos., Caracas, 2003*. See English version in [www.rebellion.org/harnecker.htm](http://www.rebellion.org/harnecker.htm).

come in contact once they reach the higher ranks. Some officers forget their social origins and start kneeling before the interests of the dominant classes.

A fifth factor is the effect on the Chávez generation of the social upheaval commencing on February 27, 1989. This convulsion was aimed at rejecting the package of neoliberal economic measures imposed by the Carlos Andrés Pérez government, which, among other things, sought to reduce public expenditures, deregulate prices, liberalize trade, promote foreign investment, and privatize state companies. The immediate cause of the popular rebellion was the increase in public transportation fees provoked by higher gasoline prices. People from the poorest neighborhoods took to the streets and began setting buses on fire, looting trade centers, and destroying stores and supermarkets. The military came out to restore “order.” The revolt, known as the “Caracazo” because it was centered in the capital city (though similar outbreaks took place in several other parts of the country) ended with a huge massacre.<sup>6</sup> These events were very important in shaping the new political awareness of many of the junior officers.

Sixth, even before the Caracazo, the enormous inequality in wealth in Venezuela, an inequality reinforced by endemic corruption and one which prevented the country from solving its social problems despite an oil boom which could have provided the revenues to do so, produced a current within the military which rejected the status quo. In December 1982 this current became an underground movement called the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 and started growing internally and reaching civil sectors.

This Movement took its inspiration from three main sources: Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez, and Ezequiel Zamora. We have already spoken about Bolívar. Simón Rodríguez was Bolívar’s teacher and friend, a fine pedagogue and social reformer who strongly defended the originality of our Latin America with its multiethnic composition and argued for the need to integrate indigenous peoples and black slaves into the continent’s future societies. He was a strong advocate for the creation of original institutions adapted to our own world, and he rejected the imitation of European solutions, convinced that, “We either invent or we err.” Ezequiel Zamora was a liberal general who fought against the conservatives during the federal war of 1850 and who encouraged a struggle to death against the oligarchy and in favor of the distribution of land to the peasants.

The Caracazo accelerated the plans of the young Movimiento, and three years later, on February 4, 1992, it organized a military rebellion against president Pérez that failed in its immediate goals but placed lieutenant colonel Hugo Chávez Frías, the main leader of the Movimiento, at the center of the nation’s theater of events. This charismatic leader needed only two minutes of television time to register his personality in the minds of his people. In that short space of time he publicly assumed responsibility for events, in a country where no other leader had ever before adopted this kind of attitude. He called upon the insurgents to surrender, but he issued his famous sentence: “For the time being!” This was a clear message to the people that he had not given up the struggle. Thanks to this attitude he was able to build positive public opinion around him and his project, in a country where skepticism for politics and politicians permeated much of society, including the middle classes.

This initial commitment by Chávez paved the way for his strong victory in the 1998 presidential elections. His election, accepted favorably by many of his fellow military men, provides a seventh reason for the Venezuelan military’s uniqueness—they are now in a favorable position to carry out the tasks of the new government. By doing this, the military could recover its prestige and overcome the negative image provoked by the Caracazo. And supporting Chávez and his program

---

<sup>6</sup> The true number of casualties is not known. The official number recognized by the government is 372 dead, but human rights organizations have put it at 5,000.

allowed the military to put into practice what officers had learned in their schooling and from their experiences, that is, to defend the democratic system. Had not respect for the Constitution and its laws been one of the main principles they had received during their training and one of the reasons why some of the officers who now defended Chávez and his project had adopted a rather critical attitude toward the coup of 1992 he had organized?

In most Latin American countries, any attempt to carry out a deep social transformation has faced the complex straightjacket of existing laws, whose only goal is to protect the system from any change affecting the interests of the ruling classes. To overcome this barrier to change in Venezuela, the first measure of the newly-elected government was to launch a democratic process to change the rules of the game inherited from the past and found in effect a new State, giving birth to a new set of institutions which would allow social change to occur. A Constituent Assembly was called in 1999 with 131 members. It sat for about six months and finally submitted a draft for a new constitution, approved by an overwhelming majority (129 votes). This draft was then submitted to the Venezuelan people, obtaining 70 percent approval.

This new constitution is centered on social justice, freedom, the political participation of the people, the protection of the nation's heritage (in effect, opposition to neoliberalism), and the staunch defense of Venezuela's national sovereignty. Equality before the law includes indigenous populations, who now have the right to keep and develop their ethnic and cultural identities, values, spiritual beliefs, and holy places, as well as those where they practice their cults. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the experience of making a new constitution is the fact that this "Magna Carta" introduces the concept of popular sovereignty. It states,

All male and female citizens have the right to freely participate in public affairs, either directly or through their elected representatives, be they male or female. People's participation in the implementation and control of public administration is what we need to guarantee full individual and collective development. The State is obliged, and society has the duty to contribute to open the way for the most favorable conditions to put this into practice.

Further on, the constitution states that "electors have the right to receive from their representatives public, transparent and periodic reports on their work, which must follow the program they made public." The constitution emphatically demands respect for the nation and its sovereignty, explicitly rejecting foreign military bases. It also declares the need for a truly neutral judiciary, to apply justice without having to submit to judicial leaders or bureaucrats, and a state respected by all. In the case of indigenous people, their legitimate authorities will implement justice locally on the basis of their ancestral traditions, following their own rules, provided they do not go against the constitution. Judges must be elected after a process of selection that will ensure the suitability of all participants. The law must therefore guarantee the participation of all citizens in this process to select and name judges. The national executive has the duty to give an annual report to the assembly on the political, economic, social, and administrative aspects of its work. Deputies must also report back to their voters and answer their questions, so the people will have a permanent control over those it has elected.

Besides the three traditional branches of government (the executive, legislative, and judicial), the constitution has created two more: citizen power and electoral power. The first is implemented through the Republican Ethics Council, consisting of a people's defender, the general prosecutor, and the general comptroller of the republic. The National Assembly must approve its members. The people's defender is responsible for the promotion, defense, and control of the rights and guarantees established by the constitution as well as of the citizens' legitimate collective or particular interests. Electoral power is exercised through the National Electoral Council, which acts like an arbiter to control elections and guarantee their transparency.

The constitution became the great ally of the Chávez revolution. This is because, as we have seen, the Venezuelan military took seriously its duty to defend what the people democratically decide. Once the military was committed to defending the constitution, it simultaneously was committed to defending the changes being carried out by Chávez, since these changes and the new constitution are, in effect, equivalents. When old-line military leaders tried to engineer a coup against Chávez in 2002, General Baduel, a zealous advocate of military respect for the democratic rule of law, was able to use the authority of the new constitution to defy the orders given by his putschist superiors. This same constitution was used by junior officers and soldiers when they organized resistance against the coup and pressured their commanders from below to join them.

We can make two final points in our effort to explain the uniqueness of the Venezuelan military. Chávez's economic program is a nationalistic program. It is opposed to a neoliberal, foreign-oriented globalization; instead it promotes national investments and local development. It is opposed to the privatization of the oil sector, and it tries to give priority to solutions for the problems suffered by the poorest parts of the population. The overall thrust of the program therefore fits very nicely with the military's vocation to defend sovereignty and national wealth. This makes it easy to understand why the recent actions of those opposed to Chávez—the strikes organized by employers and the sabotage of oil production—have been massively repudiated by the Venezuelan armed forces, thus consolidating military support for Chávez's programs.

Finally, the importance of the charismatic personality of Chávez himself cannot be underestimated. Chávez has inspired great admiration and love among the majority of the soldiers of the army. He is both legally and emotionally their commander-in-chief. During the April 2002 coup, it is precisely to these rank-and-file soldiers—whom he met during his pilgrimage from prison to prison, from the Tiuna fort to the island of Orchila, the last place in which he was imprisoned—that he owes his life.

Together with their people, and often encouraged by them, the Venezuelan military men have done what few Latin militaries have ever done, and in the process, they have been equal to the enormous challenges the revolutionary Bolivarian process has faced.

La Havana, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2003