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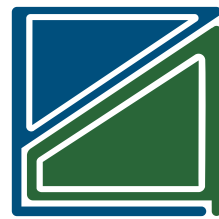

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The Rise and Fall of Radical Democracy in Torres, 'Venezuela's First Socialist City'

Gabriel Hetland

Abstract

Debate on the existence and quality of democracy in Venezuela in the Chávez and post-Chávez years remains highly polarized. Many scholars view Venezuela throughout this time as an authoritarian (or competitive authoritarian) regime, while some view it as an example of radical democracy. This article uses a case study of Torres municipality to build on a third view, which emphasizes the contradictions and messiness of Venezuelan democracy under Chávez. The article shows that Torres is an example of a radical democracy in which ordinary citizens enjoyed significant real power over political decision-making. This came about through what Poulantzas terms a combined struggle inside and outside the state, with radical left forces and social movements exploiting the contradictions of the Hugo Chávez administration's left-populist regime to build radical democracy. Torres' experiment came under strain from 2016 on due to the consolidation of national-level authoritarianism and prolonged economic crisis. This set the stage for the end of the experiment following the November 2021 victory of an opposition mayoral candidate, which highlights the non-monolithic character of Venezuelan authoritarianism.

Keywords: Venezuela; radical democracy; Torres municipality; Chavismo; socialism

University at Albany. New York, USA
E-mail: ghetland@albany.edu | gabrielhetland.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-1500-0682

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Ascenso y caída de la democracia radical en Torres, 'la primera ciudad socialista de Venezuela'

Resumen

El debate sobre la existencia y calidad de la democracia en Venezuela en los años de Chávez y post-Chávez sigue estando muy polarizado. Muchos académicos ven a Venezuela a lo largo de este tiempo como un régimen autoritario (o autoritario competitivo), mientras que algunos lo ven como un ejemplo de la democracia radical. Este artículo utiliza un estudio de caso del municipio Torres para desarrollar una tercera visión, que enfatiza las contradicciones y el desorden de la democracia venezolana bajo Chávez. El artículo muestra que Torres es un ejemplo de una democracia radical en la cual los ciudadanos comunes disfrutaban de un poder real significativo sobre la toma de decisiones políticas. Esto se produjo a través de lo que Poulantzas llama una lucha combinada dentro y fuera del Estado, con fuerzas de izquierda radical y movimientos sociales que explotaban las contradicciones del régimen populista de izquierda de la administración de Hugo Chávez para construir una democracia radical. La victoria de noviembre de 2021 de un candidato a alcalde de la oposición parece haber puesto fin a este experimento. El fin de la democracia radical de Torres probablemente se deba a una combinación de factores que incluyen la consolidación posterior a 2016 del autoritarismo a gran escala; crisis económica prolongada; las contradicciones de la democracia radical de Torres; y la apertura que ofrecen las elecciones locales parcialmente libres. El experimento de Torres estuvo bajo presión desde 2016 por la consolidación del autoritarismo a nivel nacional y la crisis económica. El experimento termino después de la victoria en noviembre de 2021 de un candidato a alcalde de la oposición, lo que también destaca el carácter no monolítico del autoritarismo venezolano.

Palabras clave: Venezuela; democracia radical; Municipio Torres, chavismo; socialismo

There is a lively debate about the existence and quality of democracy in Venezuela during the Chávez and post-Chávez (Maduro) years. Many scholars have argued that Venezuela under Chávez and especially Maduro should not be considered a democracy, but rather a competitive authoritarian or dictatorial regime (Weyland 2013; Corrales and Penfield 2015; Handlin 2017). Other scholars have argued that Venezuela in the Chávez and Maduro years qualifies as a "radical democracy" in which ordinary people have significant real power to determine decisions that affect their lives (Ciccariello-Maher 2016). A third group of scholars have presented a more nuanced view of the Chávez years, that attends to the ways the Venezuelan state facilitated and constrained efforts to create "participatory and protagonistic democracy" (Fernandes 2010; Webber 2010; Smilde and Hellinger 2011; Garcia-Guadilla 2011; Grandin 2013; Valencia 2015; Azzellini 2016; Buxton 2016; Mallen and García-Guadilla 2017; Kingsbury 2018; Cooper 2019).

This article seeks to build on this third perspective. Following a handful of other scholars who refuse to take an absolutist "for" or "against" position on the question of the existence and quality of democracy in the Chávez years, I contend that the Venezuelan state under Chávez facilitated radical democracy (defined below) to a significant extent,

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while also putting obstacles in the way of this goal. Further, I hold that while the Chávez government can be considered democratic in a broad sense, notwithstanding significant problems, this cannot be said about the Maduro government, particularly from 2016 on, when Venezuela slid into authoritarian rule. There are complex reasons for this turn to authoritarianism, which this article briefly touches upon but largely leaves unaddressed. The focus of the article is the demonstration of the ways in which the Chávez government facilitated and constrained radical democracy in Torres municipality, in Lara state, which has been called "Venezuela's first socialist city." The article seeks to show that by any reasonable measure, radical democracy flourished in Torres from 2005 until roughly 2016. After this, mounting challenges led to a degradation of Torres' radical democracy. At the time of writing (November 2021), Torres has just experienced a political upheaval with the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) losing to the opposition for the first time since 2008. The article ends by speculating on why this has occurred and what its broader significance is.

The central goal of the article is to push back against the first two views outlined above, those that hold that Venezuela under Chávez was an authoritarian regime, and those that hold that Chávez's government provided full support for radical democracy. The truth is more complex and interesting, and requires attending to the contradictions of Chavismo and how creative local actors working inside and outside the state exploited these contradictions to partially fulfill ruling party's goals against ruling party obstinacy. The article proceeds as follows. I begin by briefly discussing dominant views of the question of democracy in contemporary Venezuela. I next outline my argument and briefly discuss the research upon which the article's findings and analysis are based. The heart of the article is a case study of the rise and fall of radical democracy in Torres. In the conclusion I think about what this case study can, and cannot, tell us about the larger questions of democracy in the Chávez and post-Chávez eras.

The debate on democracy in the Chávez and post-Chávez years

The dominant view of this issue can be summarized as follows. While Chávez promised to build a more "true" democracy, based on the notion of "participatory and protagonistic democracy," he failed to do so, and in the process undermined democracy entirely. Under Chávez Venezuela slipped into competitive authoritarianism, with full-scale authoritarianism consolidated by Chávez's ruthless successor, Nicolás Maduro. This view can be found, in some form, in numerous works (see e.g. Brewer-Carías 2010; Hawkins 2010; Weyland 2013; Corrales and Penfield 2015; Handlin 2017).

George Ciccariello-Maher's *Building the Commune* (2016) is exemplary of a second view, which acknowledges some of the messiness of the Chávez and Maduro years, but paints a largely positive picture of the government's support for radical democracy in Venezuela (see also Ciccariello-Maher 2013; Ellner 2008, 2013). Radical democracy can be understood as a form of more direct and participatory democracy that directly empowers ordinary people to exert control over political decisions that affect their lives. Scholars who present a sympathetic account of Chavismo highlight the state's rhetorical, institutional, and financial support for radical democracy, which as defined here is largely synonymous with participatory and protagonistic democracy, a principle enshrined in Venezuela's 1999 Bolivarian constitution. This support took concrete form in the state's facilitation of the formation of "popular power" organizations such as urban land committees, Bolivarian

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circles, communal councils, and communes, all of which have been seen as furthering the struggle to construct radical democracy in Venezuela.

A different view emerges from scholars who have viewed the Chávez (and to a much lesser extent Maduro) administration's goals of building popular power in a relatively sympathetic manner but have engaged in ethnographic research that seeks to uncover the extent and manner in which the Venezuelan state actually helped to facilitate these and other goals in practice. Sujatha Fernandes' *Who Can Stop the Drums?* is an exemplary illustration of the benefits of this approach. Fernandes (2010) shows that Chávez's and other ruling party officials' rhetoric and policies was used by thousands (or millions) of primarily poor Venezuelans in efforts to build community media and assert their rights against private and public interests. A hallmark of this approach is the attention to the messiness of the relationship between the Venezuelan state and popular movements. These movements typically supported Chávez and most, though not all, ruling party officials in elections and in moments of crisis (e.g. the April 2002 coup) when opposition actions put the continuity of the "Bolivarian Revolution" in doubt. But this support was hardly unconditional. Nor did these movements avoid direct criticism and confrontation with state actors. What emerges from the analysis of Fernandes and other scholars employing a similar approach (cf. Mallen and García-Guadilla 2017; Smilde and Hellinger 2011; Velasco 2015; Schiller 2018) is a view of popular movements simultaneously engaging and contesting the state, and seeking to use state resources to build what Wright (2010) terms "social power," that is the power of ordinary people engaged in voluntary collective action that seeks operational autonomy from the state and powerful private-sector actors. Fernandes' (2010) analysis of community media in the barrios of Caracas shows how this works, with activists using new laws promoting community media, and in some cases taking funding from the state, but then contesting the limits the state seeks to put upon their actions. Fernandes and other scholars have shown in vivid detail how inaccurate it is to view "Chavistas" as mindless supporters of the Venezuelan state, even as they have shown how the poor largely supported Chávez in office and generally took a very critical view of the opposition.

Theorizing the messiness of the Bolivarian Revolution

To make sense of the contradictions of the Bolivarian Revolution I characterize the Chávez government as a case of left-populist hegemony. The argument I make is as follows. During the early years of Chávez's government the project of the state remained in flux. Chávez spoke of the "third way," "capitalism with a human face," and concepts like "endogenous development." Confrontation with the opposition took center stage from 2001-2004 and had the effect of radicalizing Chávez. In 2005 he declared his support for "socialism of the twenty-first century," which merged with and to some extent replaced the earlier emphasis on participatory and protagonistic democracy.

Policies Chávez took following the 2002 coup attempt, in particular the state's increased spending on the poor and support for numerous popular power initiatives, such as communal councils, alongside dramatically expanded oil revenues and a congenial regional context (the "left turn"), facilitated the consolidation of a left-populist hegemonic regime from roughly 2005-2013. This article does not have the space to defend this proposition (which I have written about elsewhere; Hetland 2018, 2019), but the key features of left-populist hegemony were the state's relatively successful attempt to build

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mass popular consent to left-populist rule, in the context of economic expansion from 2004-2012, with a dip in 2008-2009 and the emergence of a slowdown in 2013, with crisis occurring in subsequent years. Increased state spending on the poor led to significant declines in poverty and inequality. And there was a veritable explosion of popular power organizing, with a complicated relationship between grassroots organizations and the Chávez state, as noted above. Scholars like Ellner (2008), Velasco (2015), Fernandes (2010), and Ciccariello-Maher (2013) have shown that Chavismo included individuals and organizations with significant history in the pre-Chávez years. It is thus fallacious to assume that popular power originated under Chávez, although Lopez Maya and Lander (2011) convincingly argue that Chávez's support for participatory democracy marked a significant change compared to previous governments, which viewed democracy largely in representative terms (although see Velasco 2015 and Lopez Maya 2014 for COPEI's interesting history of support for participatory democracy in the 1970s and 1980s).

Left-populist hegemony provided the terrain within which struggles to establish radical democracy took place in the Chávez years. The way in which such struggles were able to succeed, to a significant but partial extent, can be understood using Poulantzas (1980), who argues that achieving democratic socialism (which differs from but partially resembles, and encompasses, radical democracy) requires a combined struggle inside and outside the state. The crux of Poulantzas' argument is that democratic socialism requires a left ruling party committed to participatory democratic transformation within a framework of resolute respect for liberal-democratic freedoms. The Party must also be linked to a strong, autonomous, and continuously mobilized subaltern civil society.

When viewed through Poulantzas' work, the Bolivarian Revolution can be seen as making significant but limited progress towards establishing radical democracy (and democratic socialism). At the national level, the ruling party – the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and, from 2007 on, the PSUV – succeeded in arousing a broad popular movement. Yet the party continuously sought to control this movement, which had many differing expressions. The vision of democratic socialism articulated by Poulantzas was never realized at the national level. But radical leftists in some local contexts, such as Torres, exploited the contradictions of Chavismo to establish a robust vision of radical democracy at the local level between 2005-2016. After discussing the research upon which my analysis is based, I recount the story of how this occurred.

Research design, data, and method

The research upon which the study is based took place between 2007 and 2016 in the context of a larger comparative project examining radical democracy in cities governed by left and right parties in Venezuela and Bolivia. I spent a total of 6 months in Torres between 2007 and 2016 on trips ranging from a week to two-and-half months. The objective of my research was to understand the extent to which Torres (and other cities I researched) approximated a radical democracy in which ordinary citizens are able to exert effective control over political decisions that shape their lives. Through ethnography and interviews I sought to answer the following questions: Do citizens, party leaders, political officials, economic elites, or others control political decision-making? What forms do such decisions take: deliberation, aggregate voting, command-and-control, or something else? How inclusive is decision-making on various axes of difference, such as class, race and ethnicity, gender, religion, and partisanship? I relied primarily upon ethnography for two

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reasons: it builds trust, and is ideal for understanding processes in action.

For reasons of space I am able to present only a fraction of the data I collected, which focused on four indicators: the extent and quality of popular control over political decision-making and the degree of institutional and political effectiveness. I attended local government and community meetings focused on budgetary and other issues, protests, celebrations, and many assemblies and meetings. I observed over 40 meetings, assemblies, marches, and other events in Torres. I conducted over 40 interviews with residents, party and civic association members and leaders, local and national officials, and scholars. Roughly half were formal, and usually recorded, and half were informal conversations occurring 'on the fly.' My ethnographic research generated many interview questions. And interviews often led to follow-up participant observation.

I also rely on electoral data, government reports (local and national) newspaper accounts, and secondary source material related to more "objective" measurements such as the percent of the budget subject to participatory budgeting, rates of budgetary executions and project implementation, electoral turnout and results.

The rise and fall of radical democracy in Torres municipality[1]

Torres municipality, in the central-western state of Lara, illustrates how local-level struggles within and against the state – approximating Poulantzas' notion of a combined struggle inside and outside the state – facilitated significant progress towards radical democracy at the local level. Torres' struggle illustrates how to articulate a transformed representative democracy with direct forms of democratic self-management over political and, to a lesser extent, economic decision-making. This experiment was possible through a radical-left takeover of Torres' local state in 2005, with the municipality's succession of radical-left mayors regularly mobilizing popular movements outside the state against local and regional MVR officials, as well as against the conservative-aligned counterrevolutionary local agrarian elite.

The October 2004 election of a radical left mayor, Julio Chávez, a Marxist engineer with years of experience with grassroots movements in Torres, set this process in motion. This election illustrates the existence of relatively free and fair elections in Venezuela at this time, since an opposition candidate won the election and had his election recognized, something that would not be possible in a non-democracy. Julio, as locals know him, prevailed in a tight three-way race against the MVR and the opposition candidate of the local agrarian elite. Grassroots movements were critical to Julio's victory, which in turn facilitated a sustained process of collective organization and mobilization that led to the establishment of radical democracy, and laid the groundwork for a sustained and partially successful push for municipal socialism.

The manner in which this occurred can be captured through the idea of "refraction," in which an opposition party or politician uses the ruling party's "political toolkit" but in a manner distinct from how the ruling party itself uses it. Julio's relationship to the ruling MVR-PSUV exemplifies this. The MVR was virulently opposed to Julio's 2004 campaign, and vigorously opposed Julio in his first years as mayor. Chicho Medina, a close friend and advisor to Julio, who is a longtime social movement leader and served under Julio and his

1 Additional details on this can be found in Hetland 2014.

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successor's municipal administrations in Torres, comments that Luis Reyes Reyes, Lara's MVR governor, *'never forgave Julio for defeating his candidate'* in the 2004 election. Medina says the governor 'established a parallel City Hall' in Torres, funneling state funds to a municipal councilor allied with him, while denying Julio's request for funds. Julio says, *'The state government provided a lot of resources to other municipalities and they didn't approve resources for us during the first two years.'* The MVR held a majority on Torres' municipal council, and blocked Julio's policies, including participatory budgeting. Julio commented, *'My own party [meaning the MVR] was against me. They thought I was crazy for giving up my power.'*

Julio is speaking somewhat loosely here, as he was a member of Patria Para Todos (Fatherland For All), not the MVR, at this time. In 2007, Julio joined the PSUV when it was formed, allegedly (according to Julio) at the behest of President Chávez himself. Julio did, however, identity as a Chavista throughout his time as mayor, and he saw his actions as helping to fulfill the president's vision for the Bolivarian Revolution. Julio identified his administration with goals of participatory democracy/popular power and twenty-first century socialism, and he regularly used Chavista language, laws, and institutional forms. Julio says that in his 2004 campaign to be mayor, *'My only promise was to build popular power.'* Julio linked this explicitly to socialism, which following other Bolivarian leaders like Hugo Chávez, he linked to popular participation:

We say that all expressions of socialism should be based on the people's participation, a participation that impedes bureaucratism…This socialism should start with the idea of constructing popular power…[and be based on] projects that make visible [visibilizar] the process of governing *with* the people, *not for* the people, so that decisions are taken by the people, in a pedagogic and liberating process, [so] that the people take on big decisions… We say that the people should make all the decisions…We'd rather err with the people than be right without the people. (Emphasis in original)

The Julio Chávez administration worked with considerable success to put this radical vision into practice. A key factor was the administration's strong link to highly organized and mobilized movements of the popular classes. Julio called his predecessor, Javier Oropeza, *"the oligarchy's mayor, who responded to the dominant classes' interests"* (quoted in Harnecker 2008:19). He referred to Torres' landowning elite in disparaging terms, calling it 'the oligarchy,' the Godarria, and 'los godos.' His view was that, *"The oligarchs and the godos de 'apellidos' had 40 years ruling here and always controlled the local authority"* (ibid.). Julio says the enmity was mutual, recounting that, 'My head appeared in a frying pan on the front page of the newspaper' *El Caroreño*, Torres' only daily, which Javier Oropeza's family owned, the day after the October 2004 mayoral election. After stepping down as mayor, Oropeza became the paper's editor, and used his perch to constantly denounce Julio and his successor, Edgar Carrasco.

Julio's class politics were clear as mayor: he confronted dominant classes and pursued policies that would benefit popular classes. After taking office, Julio swiftly moved to eliminate a lifetime pension the mayor's office had paid the head of the local Catholic Church, which Julio and others felt was controlled by the Godarria. The mayor redirected the money to indigent senior citizens, saying, *'To us, it seemed unchristian and immoral to give this pension to [the Church head].'* In coordination with the National Land Institute, Chávez's administration facilitated the expropriation of 5 large haciendas, totaling 15,000-plus hectares. Julio commented, *"We hope to return [the land] to the*

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hands of those who have always owned it: peasants of the zone…We've undertaken a war against latifundios, the struggle for the land" (quoted in Harnecker 2008:37). He spoke proudly of "municipalizing the fairgrounds" which only "the oligarchy utilized" in the past. According to Chávez, *"Small peasants can now go and display their goats with pride, the same peasants and goat breeders who they [cattle ranchers] have always contemptuously called 'chiveros'"* (ibid.:38). Julio's successor, Edgar Carrasco, pledged *"unconditional support for small and medium producers"* (Alcaldía de Torres 2011:9).

Torres' radical left mayors supplemented pro-poor rhetoric and policy with major efforts to organize and mobilize the municipality's poor residents. This was coordinated, in large part, by the Office of Citizenship Participation, a renamed and recognized version of Torres' Office of Social Development. Lalo Paez, a longtime social movement leader, was hired to director the citizenship participation office. The first effort to organize residents was the creation of juntas communales (communal boards), which can be seen as a local predecessor to communal councils (Harnecker 2008:51), which the participation office later worked to register and organize, along with communes. Under Paez's command hundreds of associations were organized in swift order. Interviews with Paez indicate his strong commitment to political and religious pluralism, with Paez noting that religion was often as great a source of conflict as partisan politics. Interviews and observations in meetings of the Participatory Budget (see below) and communal councils indicate that participants in Torres' civic associations also expressed a strong commitment to running the organizations in a civic way, with politics left at the door; e.g. I regularly heard communal council members say that 'anyone could come' to meetings and discussions with members of many councils indicated that Torres achieved a significant degree of pluralism, with various factions of Chavismo present, along with citizens who did not identify as Chavista or opposition, and some oppositionists. This shows that Torres' experiment fulfilled a key condition noted by Poulantzas in his discussion of democratic socialism: the maintenance of representative democratic rights.

An important source of this radical-left local government links to popular classes was the resistance of the MVR to Julio in his first years as mayor. This pushed him to mobilize his base to counter this resistance, with this occurring regularly in Julio's first year as mayor. In June 2005 Torres' MVR-controlled municipal council would not recognize an ordinance recognizing the results of Torres' Municipal Constituent Assembly (see below). Julio mobilized hundreds of his supporters to physically occupy City Hall to pressure the council to reverse itself. This failed, but later in 2005 the municipal constituent assembly was approved, following local elections that led to a balance of power in the city council more favorable to the mayor (Harnecker 2008:32-33). Those close to Julio recount a second major mobilization of his supporters in December 2005 over Torres' Participatory Budget, which the council refused to recognize. Three years later, Julio had joined the PSUV but still faced resistance from party leaders, this time over his efforts to appear on the Lara state governor ballot for the PSUV primary in 2008. When party leaders, viewed as being linked to Barquisimeto mayor and rising star within the PSUV Henri Falcon, blocked this, Julio and hundreds of his supporters protested outside the party's offices in Barquisimeto. The party relented, and allowed Julio to run in the primary, though Falcon easily defeated him. These examples show that Torres' radical democracy was built on a foundation of popular power and mobilization, without which Julio's reforms would have been stymied.

Social movements were integrated within the administration, including in the top post of mayor. As a teen, Julio was involved in student organizing. In the 1980s and 90s

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he pursued revolutionary organizing against President Carlos Andres Perez, including by participating, in a civilian capacity, in Hugo Chávez's semi-clandestine MBR-200 movement (Harnecker 2008:6-7). Julio placed movement leaders in top administrative positions. Lalo Paez and Chicho Medina, who cut their teeth in the cultural movement of the 1970s and 80s, held key posts. In addition to directing Torres' Citizen Participation Office, Paez served as chief of staff for Edgar Carrasco. Chicho Medina was an elected delegate to the Municipal Constituent Assembly of 2005 and then severed in several important positions in City Hall. Johnny Murphy, an anarchist exile from Argentina with links to many forms of radical organizing in Lara state, was Julio's first chief of state.

Torres' radical democracy featured institutional mechanisms provided for social control over the local state's decision making. The first instance of this was the aforementioned Municipal Constituent Assembly. Julio told Marta Harnecker (2008:28), *"There was a very clear provision of the decree indicating that anyone who had been elected to public office through popular vote could not participate in the Municipal Constituent Assembly. This served to guarantee that the vocero [spokesperson] would be a person from the community and that it would be this person who would bring proposals from the neighborhood assemblies into the heart of the Municipal Constituent Assembly."* Torres' Participatory Budget also featured mechanisms that facilitated this, as detailed below.

The creation of these mechanisms of social control was conflictual. In addition to conflict between the mayor and the MVR, there was also conflict within the local state, including in the Office of Citizenship Participation. When Lalo Paez became the office's director in mid 2005 there were 5 social promoters from the previous administration. Paez was told to 'get rid of these people.' He refused, but says, '*I had trouble with them at first. They wanted to do everything in strict accordance with the laws, for instance in strict accordance to work hours. [They would say] "We aren't paid to be here after hours."'* Paez says, *'I had to break with all of this.'* He told the social promoters, *'"This is all going to fail unless we adapt ourselves to the community's needs. We have to figure out when the community is going to meet."* So we would ask them and they would say 6 or 7 [pm] and so we would have to be there.' Paez said it took time, but through persuasion and compulsion he made promoters adapt to a community-friendly schedule.

The Julio Chávez administration's signature achievement – for which it is internationally famous (in leftist circles) – was establishing an ambitious Participatory Budget. This can be seen as fulfilling Julio's pledge that 'the people make all the decisions,' with the PB giving citizens binding control over 100% of Torres' investment budget of just under 7 million USD in 2006. During the main stage of research collection, 2009-2011, the process worked as follows. Torres' nearly 600 communal councils were key. The first part of the PB was "participatory diagnoses" in which residents mapped their communities' resources and needs. This occurred through household surveys to determine things like the number of homes with electricity, running water, etc. Other meetings were held to discuss the community's needs. The next step was community assemblies: residents gathered and would discuss and then vote on priorities, as well as holding a vote to select the community vocero, and a backup, for parish assemblies. This was the next stage, with two parish assemblies held over several months in each of the municipality's 17 parishes. The first assembly laid out priorities, and a binding vote was held in the second to determine specific allocations for the Participatory Budget. When I first met Julio Chávez in 2007, on a North American student delegation to Venezuela (which stopped for a day in Torres),

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he commented proudly that, 'The mayor can't even veto these decisions.' With a mix of pride and consternation, Julio often tells the story of how over 10% of PB funds went to evangelical churches in the first year of the process. He was disapproving of this but could not alter residents' choices (Harnecker 2008:45). The formal end of the PB's decision-making stage is a meeting of the Local Public Planning Council (CLPP), which unlike much of Venezuela functioned well in Torres through at least 2016 (and likely beyond this). In this meeting, the CLPP approves residents' choices in the PB. I attended the 2010 year-end meeting, and spoke to residents, municipal officials, civic and party leaders about the process. All of this points to the CLPP accepting what residents choose, apart from very minor occasional changes.

The examples discussed above focus primarily on social control over local political decision-making. There were also attempts to extend this control to economic decisions. One example of this was a "socialist" electric meter factory established in 2010, but under discussion for years prior to this. In a visit to the recently-opened factory in December 2010 I was told by workers about a fierce struggle they were waging with the ministry of electrical energy to establish a form of worker and social control over the plant. This struggle was ongoing at the time, and subsequent visits to Torres in 2015 and 2016 suggest that the workers were partially but not fully successful in gaining control over the local state. In retrospect, this struggle appears to have marked something of a high point for efforts to build municipal socialism in Torres, with this and radical democracy suffering a decline that was visible in 2015 and 2016, and all but surely accelerated in the years after this. I turn to this now.

The Fall of Torres' Radical Democracy

Torres' radical democracy was constructed on a base that included the following elements: electoral democracy; political pluralism; robust popular and social control over the local state, occurring through civic rather than partisan institutions; combined struggle inside and outside the state; and efforts to extend popular control from the political to the economic realm. By 2015 and 2016, several of these features were fraying. Most notably there was increasing evidence of party control over civic spaces and over Torres' radical democratic institutions. Interviews constructed in December 2015 indicate that Torres' Participatory Budget was still intact, and seen as going strong by those running it.

Lalo Paez and Ladys, a social promoter from the Office of Citizenship Participation and Popular Power (as the office had been renamed) both commented in 2015 that the PB was robust, and included participation from opposition members. Paez said that one source of conflict was with people sent by the central government through the Frente Francisco de Miranda to Torres to (purportedly) facilitate greater popular power. Per Paez, 'The central government has sent people here from the Francisco Miranda Front, who have been trained in Cuba and are like soldiers. We don't have an ideological difference with them. It's a methodological difference. They think that we have to obey anything that comes from above and we think that the people should be the ones making the decisions.' Paez identified himself as consistently favoring assemblies as the way to make decisions, while he said those from the Frente, as it is called, 'think the ministries' orders have to be followed.'

These comments were similar to what I heard from Myriam Gimenez in 2015. Gimenez

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is a fervent Chavista but has been critical of Julio Chávez and the Torres local government on many occasions. Despite her critiques, she also said that the PB was still going strong, and had not changed in any significant ways since I had last visited Torres in 2011. There had been a reorganization of the process, which was not channeled through communes instead of parish assemblies, but Gimenez agreed with what Paez and Ladys said about the process still functioning well and being participatory and pluralistic, by which they meant that some oppositionists participate and the process remained open.

I spoke to Paez again in June 2016. In this interview, he said that the PB was still running but mentioned two critiques. The first was that *'Chavistas are participating less in the communal councils. They seem to be abandoning these spaces.'* He said that he estimated that the opposition now controlled 20-25% of the municipality's 516 communal councils (with this number down a bit from earlier years due to some councils combining). Paez's concern was not that oppositionists were forming and running communal councils, which he felt was a good thing, but the 'abandonment' of these spaces by many Chavistas, which worried him. Paez admitted that opposition-run communal councils faced some challenges from Fundacomunal, the national body in charge of registering and administering communal councils. Paez said there was a case of an opposition-run communal council that Fundacomunal had refused to register. This suggests that there had been some decrease in political pluralism within Torres, although it is difficult to say with precision how great this decrease was from previous years. During my interview with Paez, a social promoter from the participation office mentioned that as far as she knew *'not a single vocero on the CLPP is someone who isn't a member of the PSUV,'* which she finds worrying. This was a change from the previous year, when I was told that at least 5 oppositionists served on Torres' 104-person CLPP. This can be seen as further evidence of a decline in pluralism.

I spoke with Myriam Gimenez again on this visit. She had a generally positive vision of participatory politics, but mentioned a concern that *'the PSUV seems to be confusing itself with popular power. The PSUV is trying to dominate the communal councils, but the communal councils are the community' not the party. 'My critique is that the party is trying to substitute itself for popular power. The communal councils cannot be an appendix of the party, they have to be the community.'* Gimenez also said, *'We have to live with the opposition.'* She said that this of the refusal of PSUV leaders to tolerate pluralism and social control (two separate but potentially related points): *'this creates a distortion of what the communal councils should be.'*

Evidence I collected in 2015 and 2016 thus shows Torres' radical democracy under strain. A major source of this strain was the country's profound economic crisis. This was manifest in Torres, in the long lines people stood in for food, and stories of hunger and weight loss from nearly everyone I spoke with (over a dozen people). And it seemed all but certain that economic crisis and hyperinflation would impact the Participatory Budget by, e.g., making it all but impossible to actually budget for works that would be completed in future years. Yet, Torres' radical democracy appeared to still be weathering these crises. While pluralism had taken a hit, interviews suggested that it had not disappeared. Reports indicated that participatory politics continued to function, albeit under strain.

In November 2021 Torres' mayor Edgar Carrasco was defeated in his bid for a third re-election by former anti-Chavista mayor Javier Oropeza. Given Oropeza's past vociferous critiques of Torres' Participatory Budget, it appears highly likely that this marks the end –for now– of Torres' recent experience with radical democracy. Additional research is

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needed to understand the extent to which Torres' radical democracy deteriorated between 2016 and 2021, and why Oropeza defeated Carrasco in 2021. With this important caveat in mind, I offer a few speculative remarks. First, it appears likely that at some point before 2021 Torres' radical democracy had deteriorated to the point of no longer meriting this designation. As discussed earlier, a functioning representative-electoral system is a prerequisite for radical democracy, which requires tolerance for difference of opinion and political pluralism to function. It is difficult to imagine that Torres officials were able to maintain local pluralism in the context of the country's full-scale consolidation of authoritarian rule in the years after 2016. It is also difficult to imagine that Torres' Participatory Budget could have been sustained in the face of the tremendous economic crisis found in Venezuela during the 2016-2021 period (with recent evidence pointing to a partial if modest and uncertain economic recovery). With inflation topping 1000% for multiple years, the act of budgeting becomes virtually impossible. Thus, the national-level political and economic crisis found in Venezuela from 2013-2014 on (with this article dating the turn to authoritarianism to 2016), likely made radical democracy impossible in Torres before Carrasco's defeat in 2021.

National factors are, however, unlikely to offer a sufficient explanation for Carrasco's defeat. With the same caveat noted (i.e. that these remarks are speculative and meant as a spur to further research) a few thoughts about local factors that may have caused this may be offered. First, it is possible that Carrasco suffered defeat due to voters' desire for change. Carrasco and Julio Chávez successively governed Torres for nearly 17 years when Carrasco was defeated. Voters may have decided a change was needed by 2021. Yet, this hypothesis raises the question of why Carrasco won the 2017 election? The clear reason is that the opposition's leading parties boycotted the December 2017 municipal election, but largely participated in the 2021 vote. Opposition strategy thus emerges as another factor in Torres' recent political change. Finally, one may speculate the voters were punishing Carrasco for deficiencies of leadership. More evidence is needed to test this hypothesis, but there is widespread agreement that Carrasco is less charismatic than his predecessor Julio Chávez. It is thus possible that this in conjunction with voters' frustration with political and electoral crisis and the opposition's decision to (largely) participate in the 2021 vote, accounts for the result.

The 2021 vote is significant in one additional way, in that it shows that despite the consolidation of authoritarianism within Venezuela, there are still some possibilities for electoral contestation. It remains to be seen how great these possibilities are. But Oropeza's ability to defeat the PSUV's candidate at the very least suggests that Venezuela's authoritarianism is less monolithic, and more porous, than some analysts hold.

Conclusion

This article has used the case study of Torres municipality to make larger claims about the existence and quality of democracy in Venezuela in the Chávez and post-Chávez years. The victory of an opposition candidate in 2004 shows that electoral competition existed within Venezuela, giving the lie to arguments that Venezuela had become a fully authoritarian state by this time. The experience of Torres shows that the left-populist regime of Hugo Chávez both facilitated and constrained the possibility of constructing radical democracy. The Chávez state helped to facilitate this by putting it on the national agenda to a degree that had not been true in the past. Chavismo added a set of rhetorical

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and institutional tools about participation as well: language of popular power, participatory and protagonistic democracy, socialism of the twenty-first century, and specific institutions such as participatory budgeting (which to be sure was not invented by Hugo Chávez but was promoted), communal councils, communes, and more.

Torres shows how innovative local politicians were able to make use of these resources to construct radical democracy. Evidence suggests that Torres' experience is both general and unique when compared to that of other municipalities within Venezuela. The generality is the contradictions of left populism. This can be seen in the fact that national and regional politicians spoke of building socialism and participation but then took actions to block this from happening. This contradiction has been shown to exist by other scholars (see e.g. Wilpert 2007, Ellner 2008, Lander and Lopez Maya 2011, Mallen and García-Guadilla 2017). Torres is thus not unique in this sense.

What makes Torres more unique is that it managed to overcome these contradictions to a significant, but by no means full, extent. Under Julio Chávez and his successor Edgar Carrasco Torres built a radical democracy in which citizens rather than state officials or party leaders had a very high degree of real control over local political decision-making. This control was pluralistic and it occurred through relatively robust institutional mechanisms. Data presented above show this, although space limitations preclude a comprehensive examination of Torres' radical democracy.

The argument made in the paper is that Torres succeeded where many Venezuelan municipalities failed due to a combined struggle inside and outside the state. This struggle involved an articulation of a transformed (but still existent) representative democracy with direct and participatory forms of democracy that existing inside and outside the local state. There were certainly tensions within this: those between Julio Chávez and the MVR, those between the Julio Chávez administration and local civic associations (with the above only providing limited evidence of this), and those within the local state itself. Despite these tensions, Torres built a radical democracy and it made some real if limited progress towards building municipal socialism.

This progress appears to have slowed down considerably by 2015 and 2016, when Torres like all of Venezuela was suffering from a profound economic and political crisis. Participatory politics continued to exist however, although evidence indicates that the relatively robust pluralism that previously marked the process was under strain at this time. Further research is needed to properly evaluate the state and evolution of Torres' radical democracy from 2016-2021. Available evidence suggests that the conditions that allowed Torres' radical democracy to exist between 2005 and 2016, such as a relatively stable (and for many years growing) economy and an electoral system that functioned at the local level, and political pluralism, in addition to the combined struggle inside and outside the state, had ceased to exist by sometime between 2016 and 2021. Torres' recent political shift opens new questions about whether and how the municipality's past experience with radical democracy will translate into a new context, and the extent to which the apparent political opening suggested by the PSUV's 2021 defeat will continue and deepen.

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