

ELIANA LOZA SCHIANO: 18 YEARS OF “REVOLUTION” IN VENEZUELA, FROM A DREAM TO A NIGHTMARE

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Eliana Loza Schiano, journalist, has dedicated her career mostly on international news first at Venpres (official Venezuelan agency), then UPI (United Press International), later at the daily Venezuelan newspapers “El Nacional”, “Economía Hoy” and now as a correspondent for “El Universal” covering Italy and the Vatican.



Today our guest speaker was Eliana Loza Schiano arrived at our University to speak to the global Governance students about Venezuela and how it's current situation, where tensions are constantly on the rise, and how that Country has struggled to develop over the years.

As Eliana Loza Schiano mentioned during the global conversation, to be able to properly analyse Venezuela's current situation we need to firstly understand the history.

There were a few main events which shaped Venezuela. It all began when Cristopher Columbus discovered Venezuela on his third voyage of four in 1498 and reached the South American Mainland. In 1521, Spanish colonisation began on the north-east coast. This followed up with the first rebellion against the Spanish Colonial Rule in 1749, - a first attempt towards independence. By the year 1810, Venezuela managed to take advantage of Napoleon's invasion of Spain to declare independence. In 1948 President Romulo Gallegos, Venezuela's first democratically elected leader, was overthrown within eight months by Marcos Perez Jimenez, who established a dictatorship, which was subsequently overthrown again by the democratic parties with the support of the military. The life of the new born democratic republic was characterized, politically speaking, on the basis of strong instability, with the leader's power put at risk by several attempts at a coup d'etat and of course endemic corruption. Economically at around this time, Venezuela had become the world's largest oil exporter. In 1973 the oil and steel industries were nationalised. In 1992, Colonel Hugo Chaves and his underground movement, MBR (movimiento Bolivariano)200, which he funded made two coup attempts. Yet, the movement used the figure of Simon Bolivar thought of in the country as a national hero but only for propaganda aims. General Bolivar indeed supported the idea of democracy and of the independence of the people from a centralized power, but in practice Chaves's movement gave birth to a dictatorial regime, which suppressed the fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression and speech. Hundreds of people being killed, Col.Chaves was jailed for two years, only to gain the presidency in 1998- when released.

The “Comandante”'s electoral propaganda indeed was based on an overhaul of the State through a new Constitution and legal system to put into force. Therefore two following referendums signed both the massive popular support (80%) for the reform and the formation of a new constituent assembly in which the MVR had an absolute majority (120 seats out of 131).The new Charter foresaw the establishment of a new National Assembly with the abolishment of the Congress and the Senate, an centralization of powers in the executive branch and the army, the extent of the presidential term to six years with the possibility to have two mandates in a row and the complete State control over the private sector thanks to nationalizations and expropriations.

According to Miss Schiano these changes brought Venezuela to a slow, but important shift towards an authoritarian regime similar to the communist ones diffused in the area. This can be, so,

demonstrated by the close relationships between Chavez and Castro that resulted in the creation of several agreements between the two States. An example could be the 2000 “Convenio Integral de Cooperación” in which Caracas engaged to sell oil at a good price in exchange of technical support in the fields of education, health care, sports, science and technology.

Chavez then set a series of measures, the “Misiones Bolivarianas” (the Bolivarian Missions), in order to improve the several social issues of the country. For instance, the mission “Barrio Adentro” (“inside the neighbourhood”) consisted in providing healthcare in the poorest areas of Venezuelan cities, the so called “barrios”; the missions “Habitat” and “Robinson”, moreover, had as their goals respectively the construction of housing units for the poor and the diffusion of literacy among the adults; of extreme importance, at the end, Miss Schiano remembered the Mission “Mercal”, a programme aimed at selling food at a cheap price. As observed by the journalist, indeed, the failure of the latter initiative, with the army selling the products at a higher price in the black market, would anticipate the current shortage crisis.

Analysing later the economical policies, Miss Schiano stressed how the extreme state control over currency exchanges, done in order to limit capital flight and the presence of foreign currency in the country, created a huge parallel black market and with its controllers gaining during the years millions of dollars, an unlimited corruption has spread among the highest posts of the government.. At the same time the oil price has largely increased from the 10\$/b of 1999 to the 88\$/b of 2008 having as a result again a massive wave of corruption in order to possess it.

The journalist, then, described the particular relation between Chavez's Venezuela and the U.S; “El Comandante” openly attacked the American “imperialistic” behaviour towards South America, for instance, when Bush started the war in Iraq, he accused the President of willing to attack also Venezuela. Therefore the Venezuelan leader created a civil militia, “the “collectivos” aiming at defending the county from both external and internal threats. Yet, the crime rate, with weapons being available to a lot of citizens, has severely increased and if, according to Eliana Loza Schiano, in public Chavez's attitude seemed totally opposed to the U.S, business activity was regularly hold between the two markets.

Chavez died of cancer in 2015, leaving the country in a situation of serious instability.

After serving vice president in 2012, Nicola Maduro served out the remainder of Chavez’s term of presidency following his death, capturing nearly 51 percent of the votes. Maduro’s early interest in politics began whilst he was working as a bus driver in Caracas, as he became the representative in the transit workers union and gradually rose through the ranks. In 1994, Maduro, and his then future wife, who was starting out to become a lawyer, both campaigned for Chavez, (then an army officer) at the time of his imprisoned and after leading an unsuccessful coup attempt. In 1998, he was then elected to chamber of deputies and in 1999 Maduro then became a member of the National Constituent Assembly. When the legislature in the Chamber of duties became the unicameral National Assembly, Maduro began serving there in the year 2000. From 2005-2006 he then became speaker for the President then foreign minister and in 2012 Maduro was positioned as Vice President.

Even though it was thought out to be that Maduro would end up binding the country together it had the complete opposite effect. In 2014 middle class citizens all over the country started to protest against his government, however the military and police were in support of Maduro. Leopoldo Lopez even turned himself in to the National Guard and was imprisoned (opposition). By February 2016, there was the first fall in the price of oil in 20 years and hundreds of thousands of people took part in protests calling for the removal of President Maduro accusing him of the economic crisis. By August 2017, Maduro called for a new Constituent assembly which would change all the articles, which would be an obstacle for his policies enable to take out his opposition.

After hearing about Maduro's history and how he became President of Venezuela, Our speaker for the global conversation, Eliana Loza Schiano, described to us the current economic struggle which has developed over the course of time, especially with Maduro's Presidency. As a result of the extremely low oil price, declining of industrial production and falling non-oil exports and the governments ideological nationalisation of industries, the inflation increased and is now registered as one of the highest levels in the world. Unfortunately the deterioration of the economy has led to a very large amount of shortages - food and medicine - the government distributes bags of foods from Maduro's company which is based in Mexico, and as the military have taken control of the black market- the food bags have increased enormously in price, making food a lot more difficult to buy- to the point where people are finding their food from the streets. Starvation and death is a National tragedy in Venezuela.

It was also mentioned that sanctions were put in place, first by the Obama administration- who prohibited seven government officials from Venezuela to visit the U.S, as they represented a serious threat to security. Secondly, Canada have prevented national officials to do business with thirteen government officials in Venezuela, as well as Maduro.

It's hard to tell where Venezuela will be in ten years, I believe that what Eliana Loza Schiano has spoken to us about, I am able to comprehend that Maduro and his supporters currently have total control of the government and are showing no signs of slowing down. Unfortunately it is anticipated that prices will increase as well as immigration out of the country are both inevitable. The economic crisis is only deepening. Presidential elections are scheduled for next year with the possibilities of a number of outcomes. If the elections are held fairly and the opposition unites their participation-it could be the end for Maduro, or, it could be the opposite which means that Venezuela could be pushed deeper into dictatorship, or somehow the military could take over and take charge of Venezuela. In this case, I believe that only time will tell.

We would like to thank Eliana Loza Schiano for joining us to speak about the current situation in Venezuela, as I believe that the conversation has only enriched our knowledge about the country itself, and how we, as global governance students, will hopefully be able to one day, take a stand.

