Article

A Starving Revolution: ID Cards and Food Rationing in Bolivarian Venezuela

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine the controversy around the “Carnet de la Patria,” a national identity card issued in Venezuela in December 2016. I argue that this ID card belongs to a larger project of surveillance and regulation of identity developed by the Bolivarian Revolution and implemented by the late Hugo Chavez, and continued by current president Nicolas Maduro. Amid its worst economic crisis, the government claims that the new ID card will allow citizens better access to goods from supermarkets, replacing the fingerprint system (“captahuella”) that provoked massive protests in 2014. Opponents to this document have highlighted the parallel with the cards that exist in Cuba (“ration books”), and the manipulation of the database system to benefit only those who support the government and are already registered in previous official databases. The Venezuelan case provides an intriguing scenario that defies the regional region addressed to provide personal cards to undocumented groups. It also provides valuable comparative lessons about the re-emergence of surveillance technology and identity cards in modern authoritarian regimes.

Introduction

Over the last eighteen years, Venezuela has gone through an intense transformation in the transition towards a socialist country. This process—known as the Bolivarian Revolution—started in 1999 when the late Hugo Chavez won the elections, and it continues nowadays under the presidency of his political heir, Nicolas Maduro, and the Partido Socialista Unico de Venezuela (PSUV) (Carroll 2013; Barrera Tyszka and Marcano 2007). However, since 2014, Venezuela has slipped dangerously into a phase of authoritarianism, fostered by the convergence of a radical right wing, an incompetent government, and a deep economic crisis (Hetland 2017). Whereas the new global authoritarian trend features a right-wing political movement that is taking over liberal governments through elections and referendums in the Atlantic North, in Venezuela the phenomenon has introduced two forces, and set them on a collision course. On the one hand, the Bolivarian Revolution was a founding member of a progressive coalition known as The Pink Tide that dominated the political scene in much of Latin America between 1999 and the 2010s in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay. These left-wing governments, and Venezuela was no exception, had massive popular support that secured their continuous reelections, like Hugo Chavez, who was president for five consecutive terms, until he passed away in 2014. Counting on this popular support, progressive governments sought to reverse exclusionist policies implemented by neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s (Finn 2017).

The Venezuelan right, on the other hand, belongs to a transnational coalition of religious and conservative groups in Latin America that operate from the Congress, political parties, and the public sphere. The recent

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attack with grenades from a helicopter on June 27 to the Supreme Court, and the Ministry of the Interior and Justice in Caracas, has revealed the existence of dormant fascist groups ready to take arms and destabilize the fragile political system (Ciccariello-Maher 2016: 48-65). Proclaiming themselves as “warriors of God,” the attackers are embedded within a nationalistic-religious discourse that justifies confrontation with the Bolivarian revolution as a necessary crusade to eradicate Communism in the region, a renewed version of the criminal alliance forged between the military and the Church in the 1970s in the Southern Cone (Rengifo 2017). The Venezuelan right has also been involved in funding violent mobs, which has brought mayhem to citizens and public institutions in the last months. With a government incapable of meeting popular demands and project political legitimacy, right-wing movements are exacerbating opposition against President Maduro, the PSUV, and his supporters. The current political scenario offers no immediate solution, with the government blocking legislative initiatives and referendums while radicalized fascist groups wait for new attacks (Gonzalez 2017). Amid this prolonged tension between opposition and government, economic crisis is severely damaging Venezuelans’ livelihood and pushing many of them to leave the country.

The current food crisis has exposed the limits of the Bolivarian Revolution, challenging the population’s acceptance of the socialist regime. From a techno-social perspective, this paper examines the *Carnet de la Patria*, an ID card issued by the government in January 2016 under the premise that it would alleviate the distribution of food and goods in a context of scarcity and starvation. Rather than considering this device as a desperate measure to counter the effects of food scarcity, I argue that the ID card fits in the long-term project of building a socialist country by eroding the current system of identification, based on the *cédula electoral* (the official identity card), and replacing it with a clientele style of patronage that distributes benefits in exchange for loyalty. With this project, Venezuelan government is doing something already seen in other authoritarian countries in the last century, by turning national citizenship into allegiance to a regime, in the path to consolidate a one-party system and to control the population through surveillance and biometric papers. Hence, the food crisis gave an opportunity to the regime to consolidate and accelerate its socialist agenda.

The Bolivarian Leviathan

The current food crisis that affects most citizens in Venezuela can be traced back to 2014, when grocery stores and supermarkets began to exhibit empty aisles while some observers warned about the permanent lack of supplies and items. The food crisis was the result of the structural dependency on the import of food supply in a country whose revenues have come from oil exports since the early 20th Century (Coronil 1997). The arrival of the Bolivarian Revolution and its project to create a socialist country only aggravated this issue, especially at a moment when the price of oil declined from \$110 per barrel in the 2000s to below \$30 by 2016 (Krauss 2017). To make things worse—and in a more tragic note for Venezuelans themselves—since 1999 the government replaced free market and various channels of distribution of food with a network of national offices and local establishments called CLAP (Comité Local de Abastecimiento y Producción), making it difficult for people to obtain basic items outside the official channels (Salmerón 2017). Instead of making food more accessible and affordable, the “jigsaw” of conglomerates with nearly three hundred branches brought interference and delay in the supply chain of goods from producers to customers.

Prodavinci, a Venezuelan news website, has compiled crucial data that showcases the rapid decline of households’ income, calories per day, and basic items acquired by families from 2012 to the present day (Prodavinci 2017). Given that the government does not release official data, the information provided by *Prodavinci* is important to understand the depth of the crisis. According to the website, inflation for 2015 has been estimated at 500 per cent (the highest since the 1950s), household consumption has fallen in 57 items, and the Venezuelan Chamber of Food Industry reports that the production index by July 2016 is -26 per cent. Written and visual testimonies of people looking for food in garbage cans abound in social media on a daily basis. Venezuelans are organizing themselves to counter the physical and psychological effects

derived from the shortage of food, but these efforts seem to be insufficient in the long term. Furthermore, any attempt to obtain food in informal circuits or “black” markets is deemed as a direct attack on the government, and its participants denounced as *bachaqueros* (smugglers).

In a joint effort by *The Clinic*, the human rights organization Privacy International, and the Venezuelan non-profit Acceso Libre, a public report gathered evidence on how the Venezuelan government might be using surveillance to silence opposition and political groups (Privacy International 2016). The report confirms the existence of a network of informers called “cooperating patriots” (*patriotas cooperantes*) (Privacy International 2016: 10-11). Although they operate in full anonymity, their presence is not only known among Venezuelans but also encouraged by President Maduro himself, who invokes people to become “cooperating patriots, in order to secure the country’s peace and stability” (Oré 2016a). The number of citizens arrested based on the information provided by these “patriots” has increased, especially since the protests of 2014. What makes them extremely dangerous is that the informers do not need to present their testimony during the judicial process, impeding the defense from questioning them and the evidence presented against their clients.

The nature of the actions denounced by these informants confirms that the main targets are political opponents, such as Rodolfo Gonzalez, prosecuted as the culprit behind the protests of 2014 against the government, and the poet Balvina Muñoz, who was detained in her home while security agents looked for her book manuscript titled *Love in the Time of Guarimbas*. The way they act echoes, according to some Venezuelans, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution under Castro’s Cuba. In an article in *La Nacion*, an Argentine newspaper, journalist Diego Oré expressed his concern regarding these informants and the way they operate against civil society: “Since the return of democracy to Venezuela in 1958, never before had surveillance by the state as well as denunciation among citizens been promoted” (Oré 2016a). In another article, this time for Reuters, the same journalist compared them to other “notorious secret police forces,” such as East Germany’s Stasi (Oré 2016b).

ID Cards and the Making of an Authoritarian State

Surveillance and identification technology offer an analytical lens to examine how governments seek to enhance and/or restrict civil liberties by capturing, storing, and managing personal information from citizens. Since its early phase, the Bolivarian Revolution made intensive use of identification technology and surveillance to both carry out its social programs and secure governmentality through access to personal data. One of the most notorious instruments was the *captahuellas*, a fingerprint reader installed in groceries and supermarkets to regulate the access to goods and items. Launched in August 2014, the *captahuellas* added more fuel to an already tense situation, and Venezuelans did not hesitate to take to the streets and the web to express their frustration with the biometric control imposed by the government. As some critical voices with the government have recalled, the surveillance deployed by the Venezuelan government offers similarities with the Cuban regime beyond the economic alliance between both countries (Venezuelan oil in exchange for Cuban doctors and other technical workers) and their shared ideological backgrounds. The progressive control by the government of the means of production and distribution has alerted some commentators that the *captahuellas* as well as the Carnet de la Patria could become the Venezuelan counterpart of the “tarjeta de racionamiento” (ration cards) used in Cuba to receive goods from the government.

The Bolivarian Revolution followed the regional trend developed by other Latin American countries in their commitment to expand civil registration. The government implemented “Mision Identidad,” an ambitious program intended to register and distribute identity cards to Venezuelans. An official estimate of this program suggests that “Mision Identidad” had issued 18 million new *cedulas* (the national ID card created in 1999) through SAIME (“Servicio Administrativo de Identificación, Migración y Extranjería”), the entity in charge of the registration, production, and distribution of personal documents (CEIMS n.d.). Nonetheless,

as the Revolution started to exhibit non-democratic features—such as the persecution and imprisonment of political opponents, the attacks on independent media, and the creation of political patronage with lower classes—registration should be considered as an instrument to advance the Bolivarian path to socialism by having a full national database managed by the government. In contrast to other countries in the region, even those who belong to the Left (i.e. Bolivia, Ecuador), Venezuela has not used personal data only for social programs but with political purposes—at least since 2014, when Venezuelans had to provide fingerprints for gaining access to groceries and supermarkets, identification programs seemed to collect biometric information for political purposes. Schools have become key sites for identification projects like “SAIME Goes to the School,” where trained personnel collect fingerprints from students and distribute special identity cards among them. At the end of every campaign, school students show their newly minted documents with an enlarged image of Hugo Chavez and Simón Bolívar behind them. Photos are then posted on its official account with the hashtags #InclusionEsRevolucion (Inclusion is Revolution) and #GarantizamosTuIdentidad (We Guarantee Your Identity).

Despite the ubiquitous presence of the Carnet de la Patria in the government’s discourse and the subsequent debates in social media, we know little about its manufacturing and technology. This should not surprise us at all, given the secretive nature of the government regarding its policies and techno-systems (i.e. *captahuellas*). What do we know is that the carnet was produced in the People’s Republic of China as part of a bilateral agreement for \$2.7 million in areas such as mining, oil, infrastructure, aeronautics, technology and informatics, among many others. While the Carnet’s size and shape seems not to differ from other conventional ID cards, China seems to be responsible for the QR technology on such artifacts, which intends to “revolutionize the type of government and our country’s life,” according to President Maduro (VTV 2017). Presumably to prevent further criticism of the foreign manufacturing of the carnet, the government called for an open contest to design the carnet and make the final product appear as the result of a collective effort. Through its official channels, the government called on various collective organizations to submit their applications in order to choose the best template. The final ID card design included applicant’s name and surname, a photo, expiration date, and date of birth. The Ministry of Women and Gender Equality praised the new document affirming that the CP has a technology that made it immune to political destabilization.

The carnet was adorned with the rhetoric that characterizes the regime. Dismissing any reference to the ongoing crisis, authorities introduced the new identity card as a wise decision whose ultimate goal was to benefit the population. Two discursive strategies accompanied the official launch of the document. First, the government presented the carnet as part of the direct democracy introduced by late Hugo Chavez. Through “direct democracy,” Chavez sought establish a direct link between him and citizens. As Minister Aritóbulo Isturiz stated, “I have to register the people and I need to have a considerable amount of information. (...) I need to know if you are in Robinson, if you attend school, if you have a diploma, if you need a certain medicine or have any disability” (Carnet n.d.). According to the official view, the alleged collection of personal information would enable the government to address the specific needs of each region and social group, by solving those problems “in a direct way” (El Universal 2017). Secondly, authorities also envisioned the carnet as a key developer of “popular power” (Comando Central Bolivariano 2017: 11). With the carnet, citizens would be empowered to join the government in the accomplishment of the “social, political, and economic conquests of the Fatherland,” as the Socialist Party announced on its website (PSUV 2017).

Conclusion

By mid-April 2017, the government had issued 10 million Carnets de la Patria, establishing a record two weeks prior to the calculations made by President Maduro, who estimated that the ten million benchmark would be reached only by the end of the month. Conversely to the *captahuellas* in 2014, the introduction and distribution of *carnet de patria* was not followed by massive protests, neither in the streets nor in social media. Perhaps due to the lack of immediate results with the protests against *captahuellas*—the device was never withdrawn from supermarkets and groceries—Venezuelans complied to line up early in the morning and obtain the new Carnets de la Patria. In a report aired by the BBC in Spanish, a few of them expressed their skepticism about the effectiveness in solving the food crisis while others lamented that carnets brought more unnecessary bureaucracy to their complicated lives (CNN 2017). Henrique Capriles, one of the opposition leaders, took a picture of his own *cedula* and uploaded it to his Instagram account accompanied by this caption:

My only ID is of the Fatherland! The rest is a cheap blackmail, another cheat to Venezuelans! It is a census paid with the national treasure! How do the government's *enchufados* [cronies] want an apartheid! How do they like to force people to line up for everything, a rationing, a number, control upon others' lives.

Writer Leonardo Padron joined Capriles in expressing his discontent, posting on his Twitter account (January 21, 2017) the following message: “El Carnet de la Patria. Give me your signature (...). I trade hunger for votes.”

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