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The Politics of Ahmadinejad and Chavez: A Misplaced Comparison

Abstract

This piece illustrates that comparing the political and economic impact of Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on their respective countries based solely on generalizations regarding similarities in foreign policy discourse is an unwarranted analytical jump. To identify the essential difference between the two administrations, the article pays attention to the different domestic politics in each country. Ahmadinejad's populism seems to fit best within *neoliberal populism*. In stark contrast, *Chavista socialism* can be understood as a "heterodox" or "alternative" economic policy.

Keywords

Iran, Venezuela, Chavez, Ahmadinejad, Populism

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A couple of months ago and while attending Hugo Chavez's funeral, Mahmud Ahmadinejad declared that: "no doubt Chavez will return to Earth together with Jesus and the perfect (Imam Mahdi)" [1]. The two men, Chavez and Ahmadinejad, who shared deep mutual affection for each other, are now both out of politics, with Chavez having passed away and with Ahmadinejad having been replaced by his pragmatist successor, Hassan Rouhani. While in power, however, both Ahmadinejad and Chavez were often described as "populists" who were masters of predicting and taking advantages of the masses' fears, concerns and hopes. "Populism" in this context usually indicates a political situation in which savvy political leaders exploit the masses through the use of charisma, demagoguery, fiery language, and "distribution of wealth" propaganda [2]. In terms of its economic context, populism often emerges due to widespread poverty and high inequality in a country – although these conditions are not in any way the sufficient causes of successful populism in politics.

Here I reject the simplistic narrative that links Ahmadinejad and Chavez in favor of highlighting some of the crucial differences between the two former leaders. In the process, I hope to shed some light on the class politics of populism as practiced in different socioeconomic and political contexts.

One reason behind the distorted analogy that views Chavez and Ahmadinejad as the same political phenomena is their very similar foreign policy rhetoric and their vocal criticism of the United States. For sure, both leaders strived for achieving a (counter) hegemony and craved global popularity. Indeed, this type of foreign policy is not merely the result of the political psychology of leaders and is in fact contextualized in a broader structural transformation that Robert Cox identifies as "Third-World-Based-Counter-Hegemony" [3]. However, generalizing the similarity in the foreign policy discourses of Chavez and Ahmadinejad to the whole political and economic impacts they caused in their respective countries is an unwarranted analytical jump.

The fact that both Chavez and Ahmadinejad have used the rhetoric of "bringing oil money into people's households" [4] as a framework for mobilizing the masses should not allow us to conflate the worldviews of the two men. The political genealogies of the former leaders are quite different. Chavez had a well-established political profile that can be labeled as "leftist" – with the caveat that the term implies quite a wide range of social, political and economic perspectives. Ahmadinejad, on the other hand, came to populism from the right side of the political spectrum in Iran's post-Revolution politics, for whom the Soviet Union (and not the United States) was the "Great Satan." Ahmadinejad's political and economic agenda, therefore, may be best characterized as a *neoliberal populism*, in contrast to what was going in Venezuela under Chavez. Indeed, *Chavista socialism* can be understood as a "heterodox" or "alternative" economic policy but Ahmadinejad's policies and legacy cannot. While Ahmadinejad shifted Iranian foreign policy towards a very antagonistic discourse vis-à-vis the United States and the hegemonic global order, Iranian domestic economy was by and large steered towards orthodox

neo-liberalization. This led to a peculiar type of populism in Iran that was far from *Chavista socialism* –or many other versions of Latin American populism for that matter.

To further distinguish between these two versions of populism, let us start with the two assessments conducted by the Human Rights Watch on Iran and on Venezuela. These reports are essentially based on a mainstream perspective of the two countries in the West. But they do offer some significant findings that show the differences between the two. Although these differences are in the realm of domestic politics, rule of law and civil liberties, they indicate very different domestic packages of policies pursued by Ahmadinejad and Chavez.

In Iran, the report maintains that “...[t]he government’s repression has involved a range of serious and intensifying human rights violations that include extra-judicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, and widespread infringements of Iranians’ rights to freedom of assembly and expression” [5].

In Venezuela, on the other hand, “... [Chavez’s] first major achievement, the enactment of a new constitution in 1999, offered an extraordinary opportunity for the country to shore up the rule of law and strengthen the protection of human rights. The 1999 Constitution significantly expanded human rights guarantees by, among other things, granting Venezuela’s international rights obligations precedence over domestic law. It also created a new Supreme Court and sought to provide this court with the institutional independence it would need to serve as the ultimate guarantor of these fundamental rights” [6].

Once again, the different political genealogies behind *Chavista Socialism*, and Ahmadinejad can help us better understand the reasons behind the above differences. Ahmadinejad came to power with the blunt support of the conservative camp in Iran who has been the ruling class in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the past two decades. The second round run-off election in 2005 was very telling in this regard. In that election, Ahmadinejad, as the conservative candidate and the new darling of the hardliners, competed against and defeated the pragmatist technocrat Rafsanjani, who had gotten closer to the reformist camp to cultivate their votes. Four years later, Ahmadinejad again enjoyed the full support of the conservative camp along with the now more powerful hardliners during the infamous 2009 election.

By contrast, in 1999, Chavez rose to power by emphasizing labor policies and democratic transformation by giving people a voice for their demands. Chavez came to power with the mobilization of the working class in Venezuela and with the promise of protectionism and an increase in state intervention to provide people with various socioeconomic support systems and access to the natural resources of the country. Except for a similar promise of access to oil revenues, most of other elements of Chavez’s domestic policy campaign were absent from Ahmadinejad’s first campaign in 2005 and certainly his second campaign in 2009. Instead, the thrust of Ahmadinejad’s campaign message (especially in 2009) was to fight the old political establishment.

The second and related crucial difference between the two was their economic policies after they became elected. Chavez followed a policy of aggressive economic expansionism with a network of government companies, an increase in governmental spending on public assistance programs and the provision of more free education and free health care especially for the poor and the disabled. Chavez succeeded in redistributing some of the national wealth to the benefit of the poor, however inefficient this redistribution may or may not have been. In short, his many social programs used the country's oil revenue to transform the standard of living for many poor people.

In a stark contrast, Ahmadinejad pursued a series of short-sighted and ill-planned policies that triggered the shrinking of vital services offered by the government while at the same time causing a massive expansion of government's already inefficient and slow bureaucracy. Right after his first election, Ahmadinejad shut down two important offices responsible for planning, controlling and monitoring public spending by drafting the annual national budgets. This was followed by a national policy of cutting most government subsidies on prices, ranging from gasoline to electricity, with the promise of offering cash to the poor in return. Many political observers viewed this infusion of large amounts of cash into the hands of the poor without regard for its consequences on the rate of inflation as Ahmadinejad's way of securing his political power for the future and rendering the working class dependent on him. Secondly, he cut subsidies in part to reduce the budget deficit. As a result, the working class received less value for the income they had and the gap between the social classes in Iran dangerously increased during his administration. Along with cutting subsidies, Ahmadinejad continued the process of privatization in an aggressive fashion. Even worse, the process turned out to be deeply corrupt and colored with special treatments as many government assets and industries were transferred to people loyal to his administration. These assets were then used by the new owners to secure large loans from banks, which brought the Iranian banking system to the verge of collapse. Meanwhile, the industrial sector—either private or pseudo-private—has shrunk and the unemployment rate (for the labor forces) has increased in part due to mismanagement. The corruption and mismanagement got to the point that Iran's much criticized judicial system had to step in, as it recently arrested a number of people and sentenced them to long jail terms on charges of corruption, bribes and embezzlement to calm down some of the domestic pressure. Those targeted ranged from journalists to labor demonstrators.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the total oil revenue of Iran has been around 976 billion dollars, of which the Ahmadinejad Administration's share was 531 billion dollars or more than half in only seven years of his presidency. A considerable amount of this massive influx of oil revenues has been used for the import of consumer products often by pseudo-private entities with close ties to the government through which they could obtain import permits and credit lines. In fact, even some of the hardliners have begun arguing that had Ahmadinejad invested part of this revenue in building or revitalizing the economic infrastructure of the country, Iran would not have suffered to the degree it has from harsh economic sanctions. [7]

Finally, Ahmadinejad developed a solid reputation for unconditionally supporting those people close to him and for providing them with considerable political and economic opportunities. It was only towards the end of his Presidency, and after Ahmadinejad had parted from some of his former hardline supporters, that controversial news emerged about the corruption of his Administration with leaks about his costly travels on the public budget, including above all his trips to New York City [8]. Despite all these allegations, Ahmadinejad was awarded with permission to establish his private university in Iran after his term in office –a very rare permission as most of Iranian higher education is public. Also, the creation of a new office, called the “previous president’s office” [9], for him is part of that story.

There is little doubt that one of the main reasons Ahmadinejad allied with Chavez was to further similar anti-US discourse. Yet, extending the analogy beyond the foreign policy discourses of the two seems to be unwarranted. Eventually, Chavez’s legacy for Venezuela was *Chavista socialism*, while Ahmadinejad seemed to have left behind a crippled government, high inflation and unemployment rate and a series of devastating economic sanctions –a legacy that led in part to the defeat of conservatives in the most recent Presidential election.

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