

# LATIN AMERICAN Herald Tribune

## Coronel: Is Venezuela a Dictatorship?

In this week's column, Venezuela expert Gustavo Coronel asks "What will it take for political scientists to define Hugo Chavez's regime as a dictatorship?"



By Gustavo Coronel

Some of the most sophisticated political analysts currently writing about Venezuela are defining Hugo Chavez's regime, either as a "procedural democracy" (Luis Vicente Leon, chief analyst at Datanalisis, a Venezuelan polling firm) or as a "hybrid regime" (Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold: "Dragon in the Tropics", Brookings Institution Press, 2011), but definitely not as a clear-cut dictatorship.

As a Venezuelan who has been closely living and watching our nightmare for the last 13 years and who has done his fair share of reading on what constitutes a democracy or a dictatorship, I find this tendency appalling.

Leon became the most obvious transgressor when he said in his weekly column in leading Caracas daily El Universal that "Chavez, definitely, is not a dictator." Although he hastened to add that he is no democrat either, he left us with the impression that he admired the shrewdness of the guy, who can pose as a democrat without being one.



The case of Corrales and Penfold is more complicated because they have written an entire book on the subject. A very well-written and well-organized volume, "Dragon in the Tropics", presents us with a narrative on Hugo Chavez's ascent to power and on the reasons for his popularity at home and abroad.

The book also makes an attempt to predict if Chavez's "revolution" will have a lasting impact on Venezuela and the rest of the hemisphere. This is a volume that contains many original, well-presented ideas. However,

it left me as worried, or even more so than Leon's brief op-ed.

I have read most of the book, so I feel qualified to comment on it, even if my comments could be off the mark.

The first problem I faced with the book was its classification of Hugo Chavez's regime as a "hybrid regime", showing characteristics of both a democracy and a dictatorship. This definition reminded me of the man who was caught by the Caracas police selling "Beef and Lark" pies. The customers complained about not seeing anything but beef in the pies. The police interrogated him and he said: "I am honest. I use the ingredients in equal amounts: A cow and a lark."

Corrales and Penfold's hybrid sound like a beef and lark pie. They describe it as follows: There are no negotiations with the opposition, die-hard loyalists of Chavez are in all top positions, civic institutions lack autonomy, there are no checks and balances, the law only penalizes opponents, the constitution is often changed or circumvented, the electoral field is uneven, opposition is bad-mouthed by the president, the private media is closed or harassed, the military is bought... etc. (pages 1 and 139).

This sounds to me like all beef and no lark.

On the side of democracy they only mention elections and, even then, they admit that the electoral process is heavily corrupted and biased in Chavez's favor. They call it an "electoral autocracy." They add that the regime has a militaristic bend, is heavily state-driven, is a close ally of rogue states and a leading buyer of weapons. Could they tell us where is the democratic component in this regime?

The book tries to be as objective as possible and that is to be commended. However, I found numerous areas in which the Chavez regime is treated with much benevolence. For example they talk (page 4) about social exclusion being prevalent before Chavez but do not mention the pronounced exclusive nature of the Chavez's regime, directed against the middle class rather than the poor.

They claim (page 9) that the Chavez regime is "overcoming adverse circumstances and forging a new future." They define Chavez's political economy as "a return to import substitution industrialization" (page 9), in my opinion a definition far from reality.

The acceptance by the authors of official statistics on poverty is naïve, as shown by Francisco Rodriguez's work. To claim that Chavez has done a great job in the social arena is highly debatable (page 11). The main issue with Chavez's prodigality is not the amount of money he has "given" to the poor but the quality of these handouts. They do not empower the poor to become self-starters. I believe the authors of the book fail to address this vital point.

Their description of the April 2002 events that led to Chavez's ousting is far from precise and I believe they consider the role of the opposition during that event in a rather unfair

light.

Some of the narrative on PDVSA is not well researched, as illustrated by the assertion that Chavez merged PDVSA and the Ministry of Energy leadership into one person before he fired PDVSA's employees (page 78). In fact, this merger would only come some time later.

They do not mention the shameless Chavez's claims at the National Assembly that he consciously promoted the rebellion of PDVSA's employees in order to gain political control of PDVSA.

In general the authors even consider the opposition to Chavez, in an early stage, as extreme and undemocratic and celebrate that, after 2004, it became less extreme (page 33). This suggests to readers that they consider Chavez as the moderate force, although this was never the case. Chavez has always been a provoking agent, always ready to browbeat the opposition.

I salute the book as a valuable contribution to the understanding of the Chavez's era but I have to say that it raises almost as many questions as it answers.

Gustavo Coronel was on the Board of Directors of PDVSA from 1976 to 1979. He was Chief Operations Officer (COO) and acting CEO of the Corporacion Venezolana de Guayana (CVG), the \$35 billion Venezuelan government conglomerate designed to exploit and run all of Venezuela's mineral, metal and mining operations, from 1994-1995. He was President of Puerto Cabello -- Venezuela's main port -- from 2001 to 2002.

Coronel was author of the Cato Institute study "[Corruption, Mismanagement and Abuse of Power in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela](#)" and was the Venezuelan representative to Transparency International from 1996 to 2000. In 1994, he founded Pro Calidad de Vida, an NGO promoting anti-corruption techniques in government and civic education for children in Venezuela, Panama, Paraguay, Mexico and Nicaragua.