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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## CIVIL- MILITARY RELATIONS: CASE STUDY-VENEZUELA.

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**Abstract**

There is an intricate relationship between the Venezuelan military and its politics since the time of independence in 1830. Military had functioned as an institution of state power till 1958. The pattern of civil-military relations does not exist in pure form and often show a tendency to metamorphose from one to another. This article will try to explore this metamorphosis in the context of Venezuela with the changes in its socio-economic structure. It particularly examines the re-militarisation of politics under the administration of Hugo Chávez. The re-militarisation of politics took place by reorienting the military roles and missions into internal defence and security and developmental works and through the constitution of 1999 which dismantled the traditional control of the armed forces developed during Punto Fijo (period from 1958-1998) or the period of pacted democracy .

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**Introduction:-**

In analysing contemporary Latin American democracies, one of the core issues is the nature of civil-military relations. The wider and complex subject of civil-military relations is conditioned by the realities of time and context. Admittedly, the pattern of civil-military relations in Latin America is diverse in nature and each pattern represents a complex interaction involving the structure, status, position and power of different groups pertaining to a specific socio-economic environment. The distribution of power between the civilian and military actors within the state is an important aspect of any civil-military relations. The range of civil-military relations pertains to situations where civil authority is supreme and is at the helm of affairs to conditions where there is direct and forcible usurpation of power through coups by the military to meet non-military ends (McAlister, 1961).

In between the two stated positions, there is a wide and varied gamut of civil-military relations in democracies as well as non-democracies. The importance of the military as a power factor in Latin American politics is a well established fact and its relation with the civilian actors of the state can be regarded as a discrete historical and sociological problem. A peculiar behaviour often observed in Latin American politics is that the democratic governments are made the scapegoat during periods of instability and turbulence. The military would eventually try to weaken the ruling elite through threats, intimidation and coercion and create a political vacuum which is ultimately filled by the antidemocratic forces.

The traditional dominance of Venezuelan politics by the armed forces has been its paramount feature. In the words of its founder Simón Bolívar, Venezuela is a barrack and it continued to be so for more than a century after gaining independence. The Venezuelan history could be narrated in the lives of its military dictators. Considering the civilian rule as incompetent and irresponsible, the armed forces has crowned themselves as the supreme authority (Lieuwen, 1961). Following the War of Independence, militarism and militarisation of the political authority became the distinct feature of the Venezuelan political pattern (Johnson, 1974). The post independence period saw the emergence of charismatic military chieftain who maintained a sizeable group of armed supporters amidst the

domestic turmoil of that period where there was a constant struggle for power among the regional caudillos. This was typical of Lyle McAlister's 'Gendarmist State' that Venezuela experienced during the nineteenth century. Gendarmist State emerges where a single individual generally but not always a military man imposes a new social and political order with the help of a mercenary army and uses it as a gendarmery to maintain and consolidate his position and power.

### **Metamorphosis of Civil-Military Relations in Venezuela:-**

The pattern or types of civil-military relations do not exist in pure form and have a tendency to metamorphose from one to another. Owing to changes in the socio-economic structure within the praetorian and gendarmist state, they may transform into a civilist state and sometimes political and economic strain in the civilist state could lead to the formation of a praetorian or gendarmist pattern of civil-military relations (McAlister, 1961).

The Venezuelan politics by the middle of the nineteenth century was reduced to a struggle of power between the competing factions of the armed forces, as with the passage of time the patriotic characteristics of the early military rulers such as Simon Bolívar and José Antonio Páez instilled in the army began to fade. It had become a struggle to siege and control of the nation's resources. Warlordism and caudillo politics which was based on personal ties and patron-client relationship became the order of the day. After the end of the First World War, the rise of modern armies with technical skills and weapons eventually gave a final blow to the provincial caudillo Johnson, 1974).

The Revolution of Liberal Restoration of Cipriano Castro in 1899 was an important turning point in the history of the Venezuelan military. Castro improvised his regional army by establishing a general staff, a regularised chain of command and an implicit organisational structure with the sole motive of defeating rival caudillos. The period (1899-1945) thus saw a number of dictatorial successions from the Andean region particularly from Táchira. Popularly known as 'Andean Hegemony', the period marked a gradual institutionalisation of the military based on regional cohesiveness. The institutionalised army was firmly behind the Andean leaders and the presidency and key military command were restricted to Tachirences Brian, 1996).

The pattern of civil-military relations that Venezuela witnessed during the period from 1945 to 1958 felt under the category of a 'Praetorian State'. It was characterised by frequent overthrow of governments by military coups (golpe de estado) to meet non-military ends. Such a state was associated with a high degree of social and political disorganisation and low level of military professionalism within the armed forces. After 1957, there was an outright rejection of the military government which was evident through massive national strikes by the labour, business and other sections of the society. Civilian unrest soon took over the streets of Venezuela. The economy began to crumble owing to the fall in oil prices in 1957 which had serious repercussions on the dictatorial regime of Pérez Jiménez. The failure on the political and economic fronts of the dictatorial regime of Pérez Jiménez gave the much needed impetus to establish a broad consensus among the civilian elites for regime transformation.. Pérez Jiménez fled the country on 23 January 1958 in the wake an insurrection led by the navy and with the support of the masses (Trinkunas, 2001).

The Acción Democrática (AD) party under Rómulo Betancourt came to power in 1959 after getting an overwhelming majority in the democratically held elections, ushering a period of democratic experimentation in Venezuela. The period of democratic transition created an opportunity of civilian control of the armed forces which was marked by high level of mass mobilisation, unity among the political strata and fragmentation in the hierarchy of the military institution. The period from 1958 to 1992 can be termed as a 'civilist state' which provided one of the patterns of civil-military relations in Venezuela. A civilist state is characterized by the civilian supremacy and authority over the armed forces with a professionalised and an autonomous military and a stable civil-military coalition

The emergence of new pattern of civil-military relations after 1958 in Venezuela can be attributed to the following factors. First, the military began to lose the support of the common population as regular strikes and protests demonstrated the unacceptability of the military rule and its credibility to provide governance. Second, the armed forces no longer had supremacy over other services like the navy and the air force post internal changes brought forth within the military establishment by the civilian government. Third, the political parties showed their solidarity during the transition process and crafted a broad based consensus on common programme of governance known as the Pact of Punto Fijo. The opposition to military regime was thus not confined to political parties and the Junta

Patriótica but had extended to groups like private business houses, the Church, medical and engineering societies and the intelligencia.

The civilian governments in Latin America in general and Venezuela in particular during Punto Fijo understood the fact that for the military to faithfully execute policies, the armed establishment should be subjected to institutionalised civilian control. The endurance of the civilian control was built on a structured relation that formalised stable and supportive encounters between political elites and the military personnel (Pion-Berlin, 2009). Democratizers therefore were able to act strategically during this period to maximise their leverage over the armed forces.

Samuel J. Huntington formulated some key aspects of organisational design pertaining to civil-military relations which are as follows: lowering the level and reducing the scope of military authority; keeping vital strategic policy matters in the hands of the top civilian officials and keeping the secretary of defense well informed of the civilian and military advice. Huntington had also differentiated between subjective and objective forms of civilian control of armed forces. In subjective control, political elites protect themselves from military intervention by ensuring that the armed forces share common values and objectives with them—sometimes through a process of politicisation of the officer corps. With respect to objective control, the military is independent from civilian interference. It is self-directed through strong norms of professionalism that include subordination toward duly constituted state authority and an apolitical attitude toward civilian government's policies and activities (Huntington, 1957). In the backdrop of analysis along the lines of Pion-Berlin and Huntington, some key aspects of civil-military relations from the period from 1958 to 1992 can be put forth in the following manner. After assuming power, the civilian government tried to craft institutional mechanisms that would shift centers of power away from the military and treated the institution as another part of public bureaucracy. The ruling elite were not keen to take the support of the military for the redressing of grievances. The 'objective control' of the armed forces was firmly established and the ministry of defense became the central focus of civil-military coalition. The 1961 Constitution also helped in affirming the civilian control of the armed forces. The institution of civilian oversight was devised through the legal provisions in the constitution and one of the clauses declared the armed forces as an "apolitical, obedient and non-deliberative" body.

#### **Evolving Pattern of Civil-Military Relations under Hugo Chávez:-**

Hugo Chávez took over the reign as the President of Venezuela on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1998 by securing 56 percent of the electoral votes. The two prominent parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and Comité de Organización Política de Electoral Independiente (COPEI) who dominated the Venezuelan political scene for nearly four decades were reduced to single digits. The dramatic shift in the voter's preference and loyalties resonates from the deep legitimacy crises faced by the previous government and the Venezuelan masses calling for a radical change.

The 1998 Presidential elections ushered a new era in the Venezuelan polity as a former anti democratic leader was elected through democratic means. Chávez became a key player in the contemporary Venezuelan politics. A charismatic leader with a mass following, he was able to mould the psychological and the sociological elements of the Venezuelan society to create a mass hysteria. His intense campaigning through mass mobilisation gave a sense of assurance to the common man that he no longer represented a threat to the democratic form of government. There was no violent overthrow of democratic regime but was replaced by a peaceful change.

The second argument that supported Chávez's rise to the helm of Venezuelan politics was the fact that many of his supporters did not value the cherished goals of democracy and were ready to take the risk if it was for the betterment of the common man (Canache, 2002). The new Constitution of 1999 had major implications on the civil-military relations in Venezuela. The civil-military relations underwent a major transformation during the tenure of President Hugo Chávez. First, there was an intense politicisation of armed forces during his period. Second, military roles and missions were reoriented from national defense to internal security. And finally, the expansion of armed forces in the political arena was further reinforced by the Constitution of 1999 dismantling the traditional control of armed forces established during the period of Punto Fijo. The expansion of the role of the armed forces during the tenure of Hugo Chávez had translated into greater political power of the armed forces. The radical shift in the roles of the armed forces was manifested in a manner where they were involved in developmental works: preparing for an asymmetric warfare and was deployed for political intervention during conflicts with PDVSA (Venezuelan State Oil Company) and the police. The high degree of military participation in non-defense making and implementation had undermined the civilian control of the armed forces and increased the potential for civil-military conflict. The civil-military relations after 1998 had tilted in favour of the armed forces as President Chávez established a direct and

unmediated personal control of the military to materialise his objective of achieving a revolutionary transformation of Venezuela (Trinkunas, 2002).

### **Politicisation of the Armed forces under Hugo Chávez:-**

Hugo Chávez after winning the presidential elections in 1998 remained true to his military lineage and background and his frequent public appearance in military uniforms had raised eyebrows over the civilian nature of the post of the commander-in-chief of a democratic regime. The increased participation of military in the political domain of Venezuela had raised serious questions regarding the intentions and motives of the President as it conflicts with the traditional apolitical and non-deliberative role of the armed forces

Soon after taking on the office of the President, Chávez formed a new parallel military structure that was outside the traditional chain of military command. In the election campaign in the year 2000, Chávez sought re-election for an extended term of six years under the new constitution of 1999. The election saw bitter contest between two former military men i.e. between Hugo Chávez and Francisco Arias Cárdenas. The latter was a co-conspirator in the February 1992 coup attempt but eventually opted out of the Chávez camp due to personal disagreement over the direction of the Bolivarian Revolution. Cardenas later became active in politics after being elected as the governor of the state of Zulia. The division of the armed forces between the Aristas and the Chavistas resurfaced the differences and the possibility of an internal division within the armed forces (Ellner, 2010).

President Chávez inducted active-duty and retired military officers to staff political and bureaucratic positions. The loyal officers were well positioned in Legislative Commissions, Judicial Police Corps (CTPJ), Internal Affairs Ministry, Sports National Institute (IND), National Budgetary Office (OCEPRE) and Agriculture Ministry. By June 2001, as many as 176 active duty military officers had retained senior ministerial and administrative positions in the government. The key positions that were meant to be politically non-partisan such as the attorney general, national comptroller general and the majority of the members of the National Executive Council have been identified with Chavismo. Some close allies were also given prominent berth in the cabinet and the governorship of the federal district during the transition to Quinta Republica (Fifth Republic). The term Quinta Republica or Fifth Republic was coined by the supporters of Hugo Chávez to distinguish and differentiate their movement from other political parties.

The position of the President and the Vice-President of Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) which is a state owned oil company and the Chief Executive Officer of the US subsidiary, CITGO were handed over to military officials. Guaicaipuro Lameda who was a Brigadier General of the Venezuelan army became the President of Petróleos de Venezuela from October 2000 to February 2002.

A Constitutional enactment of 2000 also allowed the re-incorporation of ex-military rebels into active ranks in the armed forces. The rebel leaders of 1992 coup were re-coroneted with their earlier ranks and many found suitable position in the government machinery.

A general referendum known as the 2000 'Mega Elections' were carried out to re-elect the President, governors and mayors of different states. President Chávez was re-elected again for a term of six years with an electoral support of 59.7 percent of votes.

The diplomatic appointments in the new Chávez administration was formulated in a quota system where 51 percent of the appointees are from professional diplomatic field and the rest 49 percent are reserved for ex-military men. Former Defense Minister Raúl Salazar who had retired from the army was appointed as the Ambassador to the United States. As many as eight more military officers were appointed to embassies in Asia, Latin America and Europe during that year. President Chávez has effectively streamlined military and defense policies with the government's broader political and social agenda and has created an impression that there is a considerable cohesion in the regime's overall approach to military and politics (Bastidas, 2004).

In order to retain his control and subordination of the armed forces and in return gain support and loyalty from them, Chávez had extensively used his presidential powers to promote and reward those officers who were sympathetic to the cause of Bolivarianism and expel those who were against it. Caldera's son-in-law General Rubén Rojas Pérez who had reached top position within a short period of time during his regime was retired soon after Chávez assumed

presidency. The allies of the President Chávez were rewarded with important positions like General Lucas Rincón Romero became the Inspector General de la Fuerza Armada, a job which was reserved for the civilians during the Punto Fijo. General Manuel Rosendo was appointed as the commander of CUFAN which manages the operational control of all military assets in Venezuela (Trinkunas, 2002).

The Defense Ministry which holds a key position in defining civil-military relations has always been bestowed upon military man on whom the President had full confidence. This tradition was carried out since the time of Punto Fijo. President Chávez had tried to diverge from this pattern of selection when José Vicente Rangel – a close ally was appointed as the Defense Minister for a short period from February 2001-April 2002. The April 2002 coup attempt against Chávez brought back the practice of military Defense Ministers (Trinkunas, 2002). The Organic Law of the Armed Forces (LOFAN) which corresponds to July 2008 reform relegated the Defense Ministry to a purely administrative function. The law authorises the President to exercise supreme command over the armed forces, direct the general development of the operations, defines and activates the area of conflict, the theatres of operations and strategic regions of defense, the spaces for maneuvers and demonstrations, designating their respective commanders and assigning corresponding territorial jurisdiction. One of the prominent aspects inherent in the new Organic Law was the official creation of the National Bolivarian Militia, earlier known as the General Command for the Reserve and National Mobilisation. The militia was initially created as a volunteer civilian reserve force in February 2006. The 2006 Organic Law of the Armed Forces not only gave formal reorganisation to the militia but also placed it on an equal footing with the traditional armed forces and was under the direct authority and supervision of the President

#### **Constitution of 1999 and its implications on the Armed Forces:-**

The Constitution of 1999 was an embodiment of the social and political agenda of President Chávez and it evolved new equation in the civil-military relations in Venezuela. The expansion of the role of the armed forces in the Venezuelan politics was legalised by this new document. It was particularly designed to discard and dismantle the institutional structures that were developed during the period of Punto Fijo. President Chávez made some considerable changes in the structure of the armed forces and its relationship to the state (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas, 2010).

A national referendum was called on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1999 to approve of a National Constituent Assembly. The Assembly comprised of 131 seats, out of which 121 were the MVR members. The new Constitution contains 350 articles and it intended to concentrate powers and authority solely in the hands of the President. The provisions for enforcement of laws are very weak and the President is endowed with immense powers and authority to run the government at his will (Savedra, 2015). By virtue of Article 328, the military services will be subordinated to a supreme command and the General Staff was formed to take charge of planning, conduct and oversight of the entire military administration and its operational functions. The civilian control of the armed forces which was made possible through the Constitution of 1961 was gradually eliminated and was replaced by more politicised armed forces under the command of president Chávez who is the sole decision making authority. The macro-structure of the armed forces was transformed into Estado Mayor Centralizado (Centralised High Command).

There was a clear separation of jurisdiction between administrative and political activities of the Defence Ministry and the operational activities of the army. A civilian Defence Minister now appointed is independent of the Chief General and is responsible for the administrative and the political issues of the Ministry whereas the latter is in charge of the operational functions of the military institution (Trinkunas, 2001).

The internal security doctrine and its relation to the conceptual framework of developmentalism has been a prominent feature of Latin American politics (Pion-Berlin, 1992). Article 328 reinvigorates this aspect of military politicisation by redefining the missions of armed forces with respect to national defense and maintenance internal order. The army was brought into the rubric of internal domestic functioning and has been the backbone of the Bolivarian Revolution. Under Article 328, the armed forces is charged with guaranteeing the independence, sovereignty and integrity of the nation by providing for defence and by helping to maintain internal order and achieve national development. There is no distinction between the external and internal roles of the armed forces in the name of security. There can be a detrimental effect on civil-military relations if the duties assigned to the armed forces are not in tune to their professional calling as it gives the armed forces an opportunity to increase its sphere of influence.



Article 330 of the new constitution guarantees the member of the armed forces with the right to vote. The article acknowledges that the soldiers will not participate in acts of political advertising, militancy and or proselytizing. The right to vote provided the armed forces to act within a wider scope of political debate which was limited by the 1977 Suffrage Organic Law which clearly states that the member of the armed forces will not exercise suffrage while in military service. This act was further reinforced by the 1990 Organic law of the Armed Forces. Article 331 eliminates the control and oversight of the armed forces by the Legislature in the form of approving military promotions. The legislature is completely denied the participatory role which it used to play during the period of Punto Fijo regarding military policies, organisation, acquisition, structure of the armed forces etc. Thus by virtue of article 236, the President is the sole arbiter regarding military promotions of colonels and generals. The proposed Organic Law extended the period of the military services of armed force from thirty to forty years and included the new senior rank officer of Lieutenant General.

#### **New Military Roles and Missions under Hugo Chávez:-**

Soon after becoming the President in 1998, Hugo Chávez had brought the armed forces under the rubric of his greater social and political agenda. Plan Bolívar 2000 was one of the first 'civic action plan' that dramatically expanded the role of the armed forces in domestic policy implementation. The Plan was inaugurated on February 27, 1999 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Caracazo riots that had shaken the Venezuelan polity to its core. The military missions acted as a catalyst in further politicising the armed forces as there was a constant interaction between the armed forces and the underprivileged section (Zúquete, 2008).

The junior officers who were assigned the tasks of social reconstruction accepted with enthusiasm but the officers belonging from the privileged class was not that pleased as they perceived it to be against their professional calling (Pion-Berlin, 2004).

The Defense Ministry proposed eighteen missions for the armed forces as compared to six which is present in the existing Organic Law. The Plan Bolívar 2000 was primarily intended to build infrastructure facilities, to provide health care facilities to the poor, to combat illiteracy and unemployment and distribution of food. The plan was initially targeted for a period of six months but later became an integral part of the President's administrative policies.

President Chávez wanted to change the image of the military in society and give them a new direction by inducting them in his social projects. He was able to convert the issues of poverty and hunger into a major topic of public debate. The Plan Bolívar 2000 gave the State Garrison commandants an opportunity to develop their own plan in accordance with the indigenous and local needs. General García Carneiro developed the Plan Avispa (Wasps Plan) to build small houses engaging civilian workers in the state of Aragua. The first year of the Plan Bolívar 2000 was devoted to repairing and building infrastructure (Bastidas 2004).

Each services of the armed force were deployed to formulate and execute the social agenda of President Chávez. The air force provided low cost rural transportation through the 'Social Routes' Plan (Rutas Sociales). The navy had its own plan called Pesscar 2000 where the officers organise various cooperatives for fishermen and facilitate their transportation and equipment maintenance. The National Guard were made responsible for the National Plan for Citizen's Security. The military was used extensively in the flood relief programs in December 1999 in the coastal state of Vargas where thousands of people were rendered homeless by the devastating floods. The military missions became a part of a daily educational and training experience of the armed forces. Another important observation to be made in this regard was that the missions were assigned by the constitutionally elected officials and not by the military organisation. Therefore the armies were decision takers, not makers carrying out their specific duties allotted by the president and within the guidelines enumerated by the commander-in-chief. These missions undertaken by the armed forces do not pose a threat to the civilian supremacy and democratic rule as long as the leaders retain authority and credibility to restrain and contain the military.

The military policies of President Chávez faced extreme criticism. A group of retired military officers formed a group called Frente Institucional Militar (FIM) by March 2000. The group which was a non-political organisation demanded the immediate end of military politicisation, the use of armed forces in Plan Bolivar to implement social programs and also for personal gain. Another group called Junta Patriótica Militar (Patriotic Military Junta) had demanded the immediate resignation of President Chávez and raised issues of corruption in Plan Bolivar and the undemocratic concentration of power in one hand and the deteriorating Church-State relationship (Bastidas, 2004).

Cracks and strains began to develop within the military as nearly 125 officers had revoked their support to the President. Many officers who had participated in 11<sup>th</sup> April 2002 coup declared 'legitimate disobedience' to show their anger and had asked for President's resignation. The new Organic Law was seen to have threatened the traditional military prerogatives. It had taken away the powers of the Service Chief to a certain extent over the issues of control of its organisation and eliminated the traditional military's monopoly on the use of forces.

The new structure that was established owing to the new law has divided the military regionally with joint commands at each location and provided for a joint 'Strategic Operational Command' which is responsible for planning, coordinating and executing all military operations. The traditional military services i.e. army, navy and air force was placed organizationally parallel to both the regional and operational command but at the same time they were subordinated to the Strategic Operational Command.

After Chávez's death in 2013, Nicolás Maduro, the current President of Venezuela is seeking to prolong ideological rule and civil-military fusion, repeatedly referring to Hugo Chávez. The civil-military status quo will be maintained as this apparent change in personnel would be unlikely to challenge subjective control.

### **Conclusion:-**

The armed forces have played a key role in the historical development of the nations of Latin America and Venezuela is no exception. The militarisation of political authority is an important attribute of the war of independence in Venezuela. Since the time of independence in 1820, Venezuela has been ruled by dictators and there has been a constant struggle between the regional caudillos to seize Caracas, the capital city and therefore gain control of the nation's resources. Forty years of 'pacted democracy (1958-1998) was challenged and eventually overhauled by Hugo Chávez in 1998 who had a military lineage. Since Hugo Chávez first took office in 1998, civil-military relations have seen a fusion rather than separation, with both a strong military presence in government with a motive of shaping the political values of the armed forces. The government pursued a "penetrative" model rather than the liberal separation of political and military functions which has witnessed a continuation under President Nicolás Maduro.

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