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Mirroring Opposition Threats

The Logic of State Mobilization in Bolivarian Venezuela

Sam Handlin

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Movement came to power in 1999 promising to refound the Venezuelan state and restructure the polity in ways that would build “popular power” through the promotion of grassroots participation, organization, and mobilization. Once in office, the Bolivarian forces launched a series of initiatives to sponsor organization and mobilization among supporters, which ranged widely in their functions and strategic purpose. State-mobilized organizations can be seen as operating in three different arenas of politics: the local governance arena; the electoral arena; and the protest arena. From an ideological standpoint, the Bolivarian Movement was oriented toward sponsoring organizations that could operate in the first of these arenas, helping realize Chávez’s vision of constructing a “protagonistic democracy” by establishing vehicles for citizen participation in local governance. In the terminology of this volume, these activities are best seen as a form of “infrastructural mobilization,” working to solidify political support and achieve the government’s longer-term aims. As the polarizing Bolivarian government met with opposition, however, its initiatives in social mobilization often became geared toward sponsoring organizations suited to operating in the electoral and protest arenas. These activities are best seen as forms of “reactive” and “proactive” mobilization, ways to defend against threats posed by an increasingly powerful opposition.

I propose a mirroring theory for explaining the evolution of state-mobilized groups in Venezuela and their respective emphases, which reduces to two claims. First, the degree to which the government has engaged in infrastructural mobilization, with state-mobilized groups geared toward the local governance arena, vis-à-vis proactive or reactive mobilization, with those groups geared toward the protest or electoral arenas, has been inversely related to the seriousness of the threat posed by the opposition. Second, when

engaged in the latter forms of mobilization, the government has focused on sponsoring organizations best suited to operate in whichever of these two arenas – that of protests or elections – has corresponded to the focus of opposition strategies during particular time periods. This mirroring theory, which has some resemblance to the notion of “mirror-image design” advanced in Chapter 8, helps us think systematically about the motives behind mobilizational initiatives and how incumbents decide between multiple strategic options, one of the key issues highlighted in this volume’s introduction. While governments may draw on an extensive repertoire of mobilizational strategies to “rule by other means,” the imperative of dealing with open opposition threats may tend to trump other motivations when making these choices.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 9.2 highlights two contextual variables – the competitiveness of autocratic regimes and strength of states – that serve as scope conditions, shaping the strategic environment and giving state-mobilized movements (SMMs) a distinctive character in Venezuela when compared to other autocracies examined in this volume. The bulk of the chapter – Sections 9.3 through 9.7 – then presents the mirroring theory. To do so, I break the Bolivarian era into four periods distinguished by variation in the degree and nature of opposition threats and examine how mobilizational initiatives changed in response to this shifting landscape.

9.2 CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS SHAPING STRATEGY CHOICE

Bolivarian Venezuela possessed two important contextual conditions – a highly competitive autocratic regime and a very weak state – that differentiate the case from many others examined in this volume and which greatly influenced the logic and nature of SMMs. This section first offers some background information on Venezuela before the rise to power of the Bolivarian Movement. I then explicitly discuss these two contextual conditions and how they shaped SMMs in Bolivarian Venezuela.

9.2.1 Background

Venezuela possessed one of Latin America’s longest-standing democracies prior to the Bolivarian era. This democratic regime was established in 1958 after a broad opposition movement successfully overthrew the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. As democracy collapsed across South America in the 1960s and 1970s, Venezuela’s “Punto Fijo” democracy (so named after the location at which its founding pact was agreed upon) proved remarkably resilient and stable. During the 1970s and early 1980s, scholars frequently invoked the idea of “Venezuelan exceptionalism,” referring to an island of democratic rule and relative political stability amid a sea of military regimes

or, as in neighboring Colombia, seemingly intractable civil conflicts (Ellner and Tinker Salas, 2005).

Punto Fijo democracy was also beset by several severe pathologies, which eventually fostered great citizen alienation and discontent. Perhaps most consequentially, Venezuelan democracy was erected on a very weak state in which corruption and patrimonialism were widespread. While the oil economy boomed in the 1970s, such issues were easy to sweep under the rug. When oil prices crashed and the country experienced other economic challenges in the 1980s, these long-standing problems with corruption increased in salience. The last decades of the twentieth century therefore saw Venezuela mired in a deep “state crisis,” a situation in which the state proved highly ineffective in the delivery of basic goods and highly venal in its treatment of citizens, leading to widespread discontent with basic state institutions (Handlin, 2017).

The Bolivarian Movement led by Hugo Chávez emerged in this context, promising to refound the Venezuelan state and create a “protagonistic democracy” that would open up new avenues for popular participation. These ideas were already developed in many of the programmatic documents that Chávez and other conspirators drew up to present to the public before launching a coup against the Venezuelan government in 1992. While the coup failed, Chávez and other leaders of the MBR-200 elicited great sympathy from a highly anti-systemic public fed up with the country’s political class. Therefore, Chávez and the MBR-200 were able to garner a pardon and contest the 1998 elections, running on a program centered on the convocation of a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution, refound the Venezuelan state, and implement a more participatory form of government that would address the deficits of representation and social citizenship in the Punto Fijo system.

9.2.2 A Highly Competitive Autocracy

After winning power, Chávez and the Bolivarian forces utilized the constituent process not only to write a new constitution but also to remove opponents from the state and neuter institutions of horizontal accountability (Coppedge, 2002; Corrales and Penfold, 2011; Handlin, 2017). Domination over the state subsequently allowed the Bolivarian forces to tilt the playing field against opponents, such that by 2004 the political regime was best considered competitive authoritarian (Levitsky and Way, 2002).

Competitive authoritarianism in Venezuela involved a relatively contested and liberal autocracy, even when compared to other hybrid regimes. Throughout the Bolivarian period, the opposition has been given fairly wide latitude to mobilize and protest in the streets. Only after the start of a large protest cycle in 2014 did serious repression begin, and that repression was not extensive enough to dissuade activity in the protest arena altogether. The electoral arena in Venezuela has also been unusually competitive (see Table 9.1). From 1999 through 2003, no election was held to which the opposition

TABLE 9.1 *Major elections and referenda during the Fifth Republic, 1999–2017*

Year	Election	Margin
1999	Constituent Assembly	+44 (Semi-boycotted)
2000	Presidential	+22 (Semi-boycotted)
2001	None	
2002	None	
2003	None	
2004	Recall referendum	+16
2005	Legislative	Boycotted
2006	Presidential	+26
2007	Constitutional referendum	-1
2008	Gubernatorial	+12
2009	Constitutional referendum	+10
2010	Legislative	+1
2011	None	
2012	Presidential, Gubernatorial	+11
2013	Presidential	+2
2014	None	
2015	Legislative	-15
2016	None (cancelled)	
2017	Gubernatorial	+9

wholeheartedly committed. From 2004 onward, however, highly contested elections or referendum were held nearly every year, due to renewed opposition commitment to electoral strategies, the nonconcurrent electoral calendar, and the plebiscitarian nature of the Bolivarian Revolution, which sometimes led to major referenda being held in years without regularly scheduled elections.

The highly competitive nature of the authoritarian regime in Venezuela strongly shaped the government's approach to SMMs, incentivizing reliance on social mobilization as a tool for countering opposition in the protest arena and for building a set of grassroots organizations that could coordinate with party structures for campaigning and electioneering. The Bolivarian government entered office greatly invested in using social mobilization for other purposes, especially activities in the local governance arena that most closely mirror the concept of "infrastructural development" advanced in the introduction of this volume. Faced with high levels of opposition threat in both the protest and electoral arenas given the regime context, however, the government was pressed into activities that more neatly fit into the categories

of “reactive” and “pro-active” mobilization. The case points to a more general proposition about autocracies: the more competitive the regime, the more likely that governments will focus on reactive and proactive strategies rather than other forms of social mobilization less directly geared toward dealing with open opposition.

9.2.3 State Weakness

After rising to prominence and power through critiques of the Venezuelan state crisis and the political status quo, the Bolivarian Movement inherited this weak state in office (Handlin, 2017). State weakness shaped the nature of SMMs in Bolivarian Venezuela in several ways. For one, the weak state further fueled reliance on state-mobilized groups in general. At the head of a state that had proven highly corrupt and frequently incapable of delivering services and providing public goods, Chávez’s options for using established state structures to mobilize support were limited. It is no surprise, for example, that his first major initiative in social policy – Plan Bolívar 2000 – was implemented mainly through the military, the one wing of the state apparatus in which he placed confidence. As we will see, the subsequent reliance on SMMs and the formation of para-statal entities like the Communal Councils to mobilize support and achieve local governance objectives reflected a similar logic. While the Bolivarian Movement had an ideological commitment to such notions, necessity – in this case, a weak state apparatus – was also the mother of invention.

The Venezuelan experience also demonstrates that state weakness is likely to place substantial limitations on the ability of governments to control state-mobilized groups. Principle-agent problems are inherent to situations in which states mobilize parts of society to do their bidding and accomplish particular goals. Those societal groups, once formed and mobilized, may operate according to their own incentives and goals, which may not fully align with those actors within the state who supported and pushed their mobilization. Following analyses of principle-agent dynamics from many other settings, we might conclude that the ability of states to monitor the activities of state-mobilized groups and to credibly sanction them for bad behavior will be critical to limiting principle-agent problems that might arise. Weak states are likely to have less capacity for both monitoring and sanctioning. Entities tasked with liaising with state-mobilized groups – whether relevant bureaucratic agencies or, in some cases, security services – are likely to have less potent tools for covert surveillance, less capacity for organizing and maintaining records related to the activities of state-mobilized groups, and less ability to decisively act to punish state-mobilized groups that pursue nonsanctioned activities.

As we will see, a recurrent dynamic during the Fifth Republic, observable even in its earliest years and particularly notable more recently, has involved

state-mobilized groups affiliated with the Bolivarian Movement engaging in activities that compromise or complicate the broader goals of the government. In particular, certain state-mobilized groups (a subset of Bolivarian Circles in the early years, a subset of *colectivos*, or community-based support groups, more recently) have often engaged in violence and crime. The Venezuelan government has supported at least some of this violence, using state-mobilized groups as vehicles for sowing fear among the opposition. But the activities of these groups have also seemed beyond the control of the government at times. And the government's association with them has tended to be viewed very negatively by the Venezuelan public, leading to losses of mass support. To a less spectacular degree, the principle-agent problem can also be seen as relevant to the government's attempt to use certain state-mobilized groups as vehicles for electoral mobilization. One of the constant challenges the government has faced has involved creating groups that would work cooperatively with Bolivarian parties.

9.3 MIRRORING THREATS: EXPLAINING VARIATION IN STATE MOBILIZATION OVER TIME

The chapter now turns to an explanation of change over time within the Venezuelan case. The focus is not so much to test the propositions established in the previous section regarding state and regime context but to analyze how and why – with this context largely taken as a given – the Venezuelan government's approach to mobilization shifted so much during the Bolivarian era.

State-mobilized organizations serve many functions and often operate in multiple arenas of politics in authoritarian contexts. The logic animating state decisions to create or cultivate these organizations (and to create or cultivate particular types of organizations in particular situations) can involve calculations that take into account political action occurring across multiple arenas. One part of this calculation may involve activities in the protest arena, the engagement of state-mobilized organizations in contention and countermobilization to support the government or, more darkly, in violence against opposition protesters. But the calculation may also involve the activities of state-mobilized organizations in the electoral arena, such as getting out the vote on behalf of pro-regime parties and politicians or action in the realm of local governance. To best understand the shifting landscape of state-mobilized organizations over time in Venezuela (and elsewhere), we have to appreciate this broader strategic landscape composed of multiple arenas.

In considering the Venezuelan case, it is heuristically useful to think of these three arenas of action – the protest arena, the electoral arena, and the local governance arena – and to locate the major Bolivarian initiatives in state-mobilized organizations with respect to their respective emphases. Figure 9.1 displays this notion graphically. It should be emphasized that this is a heuristic

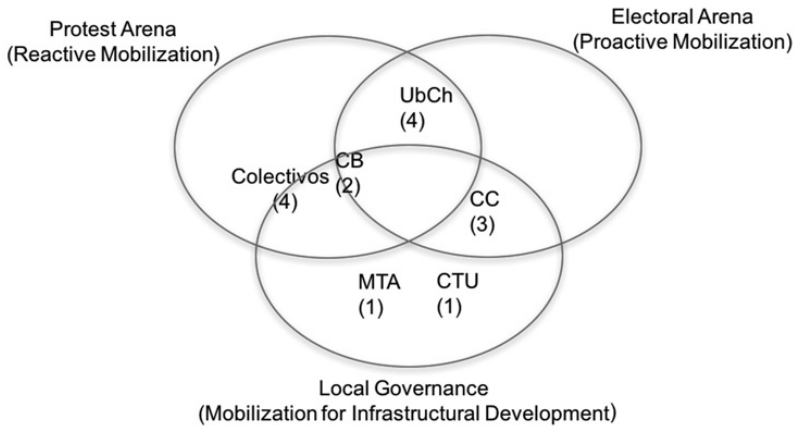


FIGURE 9.1 Arenas of operation and dominant types of mobilization

and that the locations in this space are not precisely fixed: For example, Communal Councils (CCs) have engaged in activity in the protest arena, but it has not been an emphasis for that group of organizations. Therefore, they are located in the figure only at the intersection of the electoral and local governance arenas. The numbers in parentheses refer to the phases of the Fifth Republic in which each organization was created or, in the case of the colectivos, increased in prominence.

We can also match these three arenas of politics with nominal values from the typology of mobilization strategies developed in the volume’s introduction. The local governance arena is marked by mobilization for infrastructural development, attempts to use organize society to accomplish development projects that local state officials are incapable or unwilling to undertake. The protest arena is most likely to be characterized by defensive or reactive mobilization, as government mobilizes supporters to engage in counterprotest against contentious forces in society. Finally, proactive mobilization seems likely to be the dominant form in the electoral arena: state incumbents build up grassroots organizing capacity in advance of elections, seeking to establish an organizational advantage that will allow them to withstand anticipated opposition challenges.

Figure 9.1, when supplemented by the additional information provided in Table 9.2, also helps us better consider the logic of temporal change among state-mobilized organizations in Venezuela. We can see two broad trends. First, the emphasis of SMMs on local governance has risen and fallen with the threat level of the opposition. In the first few years of the Chávez era, with the opposition in total disarray, initiatives almost exclusively focused on stimulating citizen participation and organization in local governance, a longtime ideological emphasis of the Bolivarian Movement. This focus

TABLE 9.2 *Opposition threats and state mobilization responses across four phases*

Phase	Rough Dates	Key Organizations	Opposition Threat Level and Arena
1	1999–2000	Urban Land Committees (CTU), Water Tables (MTA)	Very low, none
2	2001–2003	Bolivarian Circles (BC)	High, protest arena
3	2004–2012	Communal Councils (CC)	Moderate, electoral arena
4	2013–	Colectivos, Battle Units Hugo Chávez (UBCh)	High, both arenas.

dropped off somewhat as the opposition threat swelled in 2001–2003, was accentuated again as the opposition threat level diminished in 2004–2012, and then dropped off again in the current period, when the opposition threat has been at its highest.

Second, to the extent that state-mobilized organizations have been geared toward countering opposition threats, their relative emphasis on the protest or electoral arena has mirrored the nature of the gravest threat. When the opposition was contesting power in the streets during the 2001–2003 period, the government launched the Bolivarian Circle program to meet that challenge. Once the opposition returned to the electoral arena from 2004 to 2012, the government launched the Communal Council program. And with the opposition presenting grave threats both in the streets and at the ballot box from 2013 onward, the government has emphasized groups like the *colectivos* and *UbCh* that are explicitly politicized and together can operate in both spheres. Less well conveyed, but discussed further in Section 9.7, is that these groups are not just active in the protest arena but have shifted increasingly toward repression rather than simple counterprotest.

9.4 VERY LITTLE OPPOSITION THREATS, 1999–2000

The years immediately following Chávez's 1998 election were marked by a rapid sequence of controversial institutional reforms and a reeling opposition that presented very little threat to the new government. The arrival to power of Chávez in early 1999 was followed by a referendum on writing a new constitution, elections to select a constituent assembly to author the document (which were rigged to favor the Bolivarian Movement), another referendum to approve the document, and then "mega-elections" in July 2000 for all elected positions mandates by the new magna carta. With the population largely supportive of the constitutional reform process, a bitterly divided opposition provided little threat to Chávez and the Bolivarian Movement during this stage in either the protest or electoral arenas.

9.4.1 Water Tables and Urban Land Committees

With the Chávez administration focused on institutional reform and remaking the state, initiatives to mobilize society were modest and had great trouble getting off the ground. Nevertheless, the government did at least attempt to push forward two such programs to sponsor local-level organization and mobilization among supporters. As predicted by the theory, in the absence of a meaningful opposition threat these initiatives focused overwhelmingly on local governance or, in the terminology of this volume, infrastructural mobilization, in keeping with the ideological commitments of the new government.

As the Bolivarian Movement came to power, lack of access to potable water and improved sanitation presented a serious and all-too-common problem, especially in rural communities. The most concerted action of the government to support social organization and mobilization as a means of fighting poverty was the extension of a program to sponsor the formation of *Mesas Técnicas de Agua* (MTA), community-based associations that would work with government agencies to improve water and sanitation infrastructure in underserved neighborhoods. During Chávez's first months in office, the government organized a series of workshops and meetings to discuss the national expansion of the program (Arconada Rodríguez, 2005). Attempts to translate plans into policy action proved difficult, given that they required larger-scale changes to the regulation of water provision in the country. While it took several further years for MTA to proliferate, the key point for present purposes is that they were born in a context of low threat and designed exclusively for infrastructural mobilization in the local governance arena.¹

A similar program also emerged during this period in the area of housing. One of the more ambitious initiatives to emerge in the first year of the Chávez administration was *El Programa de Habilitación Física de Barrios*, a comprehensive policy agenda developed by *El Consejo Nacional de la Vivienda* (CONAVI), a national entity established a decade previously to address the systemic housing problems in the country. In laying out a new approach for dealing with housing problems, CONAVI declared that "to incorporate and support the organizations of residential communities" should be a central aspect of the process of addressing housing problems (Giménez, Rivas, and Rodríguez, 2007). This plan would eventually lead to a program to support and sponsor thousands of *Comités de Tierra Urbana* (CTU), neighborhood organizations in poor areas devoted to dealing with housing issues such as land titling and infrastructure. As with the MTA, implementation of these plans was slowed and complicated by the political

¹ According to official documents from HIDROVEN (n.d.), the number of MTA rose from 100 in 2001 to 960 in 2003.

context. But, like the MTA, the program again showed the government's focus on infrastructural mobilization when not facing serious opposition threats.

9.5 STRONG OPPOSITION THREATS IN THE PROTEST ARENA, 2001–2003

By 2001 opposition forces had regrouped enough to pose a real challenge to the Chávez government. This year inaugurated an extremely polarizing period in which the opposition attempted to oust Chávez through a variety of nonelectoral means and during which the ability to mobilize supporters into the streets and control the public sphere was critical for both sides in the conflict. Reactive forms of mobilization in the protest arena became the dominant strategy of the government.

Opposition protest mobilizations occurred frequently throughout 2001 but increased notably at the end of the year, after the Chávez administration controversially used an enabling law to implement a sweeping package of new economic policies by decree. As opposition protests became more regular and swelled in size, they were increasingly met by loyalist counterprotests. Each side was putting tens of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands, of people onto the streets of Caracas on an almost weekly basis. This increasingly tense atmosphere reached a peak in April 2002 when the opposition launched a complex coup attempt, which began with a massive march on Miraflores Palace that was met by a large loyalist mobilization, a clash that left several people dead, violence used as a pretext for a military takeover. While the opposition plotters succeeded in removing Chávez from Miraflores and taking him to a remote island military base, the coup broke down after disagreements emerged among the key players and after loyalist forces mobilized thousands of Venezuelans into the streets in protest.

Even after the failure of the April 2002 coup, opposition protest activity and attempts to oust Chávez remained ongoing. The opposition continued to mobilize into the streets on a semi-regular basis throughout the rest of the year and then launched a massive general strike, including a shutdown of the oil industry, spanning December 2002–February 2003. It was not until the disastrous failure of this strike, which had dire economic consequences and greatly discredited the opposition in the minds of the Venezuelan public, that the opposition moved away from contentious strategies and began to focus on the electoral arena. They did so through activating a clause in the Bolivarian constitution allowing for referenda to be convened to recall elected officials. Ultimately, after considerably delays, a referendum to recall Chávez failed in August 2004. This sequence of events augured the dawning of a new phase in Venezuelan politics, taken up in Section 9.6, marked by a substantial decrease in protest on both sides and contestation largely occurring at the ballot box.

9.5.1 The Bolivarian Circles

While Chávez and the MVR had long made the sponsorship of social organization a central part of their program, initiatives in this regard were relatively small in scale in the initial years of the Bolivarian era. As protest activity by the opposition picked up, the government launched a much more ambitious effort to sponsor organization and collective action among loyalists, calling for the formation of Bolivarian Circles by supporters around the country (Arenas and Gómez Calcaño, 2005). Chávez had first mentioned the possibility of forming the Circles in mid-2000, but the initiative really picked up steam in late 2001, with the president conducting a massive rally that December to swear-in members, publicize the initiative, and galvanize support. Estimates of the total number of Circles have varied widely, but there is little doubt that this was a very large – if relatively short-lived – initiative.² The program was relatively informal, particularly compared to later initiatives. It established a set of coordinating structures and a formal registry of Circles, enabling some degree of contacting and joint action. But these structures were poorly institutionalized, many Circles appear to have been formed and then quickly gone defunct, and the program was supported with very few resources (Hawkins and Hansen, 2006).

The Circles played roles in local governance but also were clearly oriented toward activity in the protest arena, organizations capable of mobilizing supporters and other community members into the streets on short notice in defense of the Bolivarian Revolution. Scholars have commonly seen the Circles as playing particularly important roles in the countermobilizations that became increasingly frequent, particularly in Caracas, during the extremely tense months of late 2001 and early 2002 (García-Guadilla, 2004). At times, the Circles also engaged in contentious activity for other strategic purposes, beyond simply providing a counterbalance to opposition protests. For example, in one episode, Circles led a major protest alleging unfair treatment of the government in *El Nacional*, one of Venezuela's leading newspapers, which succeeded in shutting down the newspaper for a day (Inter-Press Service, 2002). Nevertheless, countermobilization was clearly the dominant purpose of Circle activity in the protest arena.

The Bolivarian Circles became best known for the roles they played in the events of the 2002 coup. The days leading up to the coup had been filled with tension, with both sides suspecting that a breaking point was nearing. In this context, Chávez and close advisers discussed plans for having armed Circles surround Miraflores palace in case of an opposition attempt to besiege the house of government (Nelson, 2009). When the opposition did begin its

² Coordinators of the Bolivarian Circle program at times claimed as many as 200,000, numbers that seem unrealistic. In contrast, Hawkins and Hansen (2006) estimate that the true number is more likely between 9,500 and 11,000 active Circles at the height of the program.

massive march on Miraflores, the Circles were central actors in rallying the pro-government countermobilization. More ominously, members of Circles were responsible for at least some of the deadly violence when the two marches clashed, with footage capturing a known Circle leader firing a gun at the opposition from an overpass. After the coup occurred, and Chávez was taken by force out of Miraflores, Circles are also widely credited with helping lead the massive popular protest that surrounded Miraflores and demanded the return of the president (Roberts, 2006). After the coup, the Circles continued to be important actors during the remainder of this period of intense polarization. During the extremely tense 10-week general strike of late 2002 and early 2003, the Circles were also active in community provisioning and leading counterprotests denouncing the general strike.

When the opposition renounced attempts to remove Chávez by extra-constitutional means and shifted its strategic focus toward the electoral arena, however, several drawbacks and strategic limitations of the Circle program became particularly pronounced. First, the Circle program revealed a dynamic that would recur repeatedly in later years. The Bolivarian government relied heavily on state-mobilized groups as allies and actors in the political struggle but had difficulty controlling the actions of these groups, with adverse consequences for its larger campaign to win public opinion. Due to the activities of some groups during the 2002–2003 struggle, the Circles acquired a reputation as violent and repressive. The opposition certainly influenced this negative portrayal, taking every opportunity to denounce them as thugs and which probably unfairly exaggerated the centrality of violence and intimidation (versus more benign community work) to their activities. Nevertheless, surveys showed that a substantial majority of Venezuelans disapproved of the Circles. They were one of the least popular political actors in all of Venezuela – on either the pro-government or pro-opposition side – during the 2002–2004 period.

The limited ability of the government to control, monitor, and direct the activities of the Circles also manifested itself in their limited use in the electoral arena. The Circles participated heavily in the campaign to defeat the recall referendum in 2004 (Hawkins and Hansen, 2006). As poorly financed and largely informal groups that operated with a substantial degree of independence, and which were often very skeptical of the MVR, the Circles were not well designed to be mobilizers of electoral support. In sum, the Circle program revealed some problems that would not go away – a basic limitation in the ability of the government to monitor and control such groups – but also possessed some specific drawbacks related to the informal and uninstitutionalized way the program had developed. In this latter respect, they were a poor fit for the next phase of the Fifth Republic, when contestation returned to the electoral arena.

9.6 MODERATE OPPOSITION THREATS IN THE ELECTORAL ARENA, 2004–2012

The aftermath of the recall referendum saw Venezuela move into a new phase in which the opposition gave up trying to oust Chávez through nonconstitutional channels and committed to the electoral arena. This strategic reorientation did not occur immediately and did not receive universal support. The opposition ended up strategically boycotting the 2005 legislative elections at the last minute. While leaders cited concerns regarding fraud as their rationale, the fact that polls predicted a massive defeat – partly a product of a lack of opposition unity and continued sectors bent on electoral abstention – probably also played into their calculus. From the presidential elections of 2006 onward, however, the opposition launched a committed effort in every subsequent major election and referendum in the country and did so increasingly unified as the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) front. These elections were not just fully contested but also, as Table 9.1 earlier in the chapter indicated, very frequent. From 2005 through 2012, a major election or referendum occurred every year except 2011.

Opposition activity in the protest arena did not cease completely during this period. The opposition still took to the streets during campaign season and to protest particularly egregious actions by the government. The most notable protest cycle occurred in 2007, when a wave of student-led protests occurred in response to the government's closing of RCTV, an unabashedly pro-opposition broadcaster (Brading, 2012). Some of the same student groups that led these protests then continued to mobilize actively in late 2007 in opposition to the government's referendum of that year on planned changes to the constitution. In the big picture, however, this period marked a sea change in activity within the protest arena. Contentious action by the opposition was less frequent and no longer posed an existential threat to the Chávez government – rather than hundreds of thousands of protesters, thousands or perhaps 10,000 might take to the streets of Caracas. And rather than street mobilizations being led by an opposition bent on removing the government through any means possible (such as coups or massive strikes), this protest activity occurred in a context in which the opposition had renounced such strategies and was grimly determined to contest power at the ballot box.

During late 2004, coming off the victory in the recall referendum, a high-level meeting of Bolivarian officials took place in which Chávez and a close coterie of advisers proposed what was termed a “New Strategic Map” for navigating a new era in which they had emerged triumphant, would have much more leeway to implement their policy agenda, and expected the opposition to keep trying to take power through elections and not the streets. This document laid out a great variety of policy and strategy proposals, most of which are irrelevant for present concerns. Two particularly pertinent features were a call to rethink and reinvigorate Bolivarian political parties – an idea that eventually led to the

dismantlement of the MVR and the creation of a new party, the PSUV, with a much stronger emphasis on grassroots organization – and an emphasis on reinvigorating commitments and programs to enhance citizen participation and organization in local governance.

9.6.1 The Communal Councils

In early 2006, the government launched the Communal Council program, an initiative of unprecedented scope and ambition geared toward building popular power through state-sponsored community organizations (García-Guadilla, 2007; Machado, 2008). Unlike the Bolivarian Circle initiative, the Communal Council program was implemented through the legislature, with the passing of the *Ley de Consejos Comunales*, which established a very detailed set of procedures by which small communities of about 200 households (fewer in rural areas) could join together and form a state-sanctioned neighborhood organization that would assume a variety of local governance functions. Requirements in this process included the conducting of a local census, advertising the planned formation of the Council, holding votes for a variety of council offices and leadership positions, and filing substantial paperwork with government officials. The program was supported and pushed forward by multiple entities of the Venezuelan government. At the national level, the agency *Fundacomunal* was repurposed and tasked with helping implement the Communal Council program, holding workshops and events to publicize the program, meeting with communities to help them navigate the process, handling the formal registration, and also disbursing a great deal of funding. But many municipal and state governments also became involved with the administration and support of the program in various ways. By early 2008, over 18,000 Councils had been formally registered with the government. Later estimates would place that number over 30,000.

While overtly cast as organizations tasked with local governance functions, the Communal Councils also became *de facto* grassroots organizations of the PSUV, heavily involved in electoral mobilization (Handlin, 2013, 2016). PSUV leaders referred to the Councils openly as the “base units” of the new party. The Councils played important roles in the process of building the party, particularly in signing up party members and helping recruit people into party activism. Perhaps most notably, the Councils also engaged in various forms of electoral mobilization in the elections and campaigns held from 2006 onward, holding joint events with PSUV politicians in communities, helping mobilize people to campaign rallies, serving as channels for the distribution of patronage, and urging voters to the polls. To the extent that the Communal Councils operated outside the local governance arena, then, their primary function was clearly to support the Bolivarian Movement and PSUV in the electoral arena during a time in which the opposition made contestation at the ballot box the focus of its efforts.

In contrast, the Communal Councils played only relatively minor roles in the protest arena. They often engaged in discrete forms of local claim-making, which in some instances might escalate into small-scale contentious activity (e.g. organizing a group of people to march on city hall in a provincial city and demand better water and sanitation services). But the Communal Councils were not major actors in organizing larger-scale counterprotests or otherwise managing the protest arena. For one, the opposition did not make contentious activity in the protest arena a central thrust of its own strategy during this time, so the need to use state-sponsored groups like the Communal Councils as vehicles for regularly mobilizing regime supporters into the streets was far less acute than in the 2001–2004 period.

Moreover, to the extent that the opposition did engage in major protest activity during the 2005–2012 period, the student movement tended to be the protagonist. Just as the Putin government in Russia learned from the color revolutions and sponsored the pro-Kremlin student group Nashi to counter student opposition, the Chávez government reacted to the upsurge in student activism and mobilization by creating its own pro-government student groups. These Chavista student organizations engaged in regularized activities on campuses. But they were also engaged in selective counterprotests to show the country that part of the younger generation was aligned with the Bolivarian Project. The specific form of opposition protest activity during this period therefore called for a more specific form of SMMs for which the Communal Councils, in which older community leaders and activists tended to be most involved, were a poor demographic fit.

9.7 VERY SERIOUS OPPOSITION THREATS IN BOTH ARENAS, 2013–2017

Two shocks massively altered the political environment in Venezuela after 2012, with great implications for the strategies and threat level of the opposition and, in consequence, for the government's approach to state mobilization of loyalist groups. First, Chávez died in early 2013 after a long battle with cancer, the details of which had been mainly kept hidden from the public. The death of personalistic leaders is famously difficult for autocratic regimes, often setting off messy succession conflicts. Chávez ameliorated this problem to some degree by naming Maduro as a designated successor, but fissures within the Bolivarian coalition still became much more pronounced, especially divides between a radical leftist sector (which Maduro headed) and a more cynical, nonideological sector with backgrounds in the military and security forces (exemplified by Cabello). Just as importantly, Chávez had great charisma and had developed very personalized forms of linkage with many followers. It was never likely that another politician, particularly one as inept as Maduro, would be able to replicate this appeal.

The strength of Chavismo after Chávez was soon put to the test, since the Venezuelan constitution mandated that a new election be held, Chávez having died before being able to begin his new presidential term. Whereas Chávez had won the 2012 presidential election by about 11 percentage points against Henrique Capriles, Maduro won an election six months later against the same opponent by only 2 percentage points. Chavismo did not fall apart without Chávez, but the nine-point swing was significant. Just as importantly, the razor-thin victory did nothing to quell uncertainties regarding whether Maduro would be able to hold together the Bolivarian coalition at the elite and mass levels, particularly in times of difficulty. The death of Chávez, the close margin of the 2013 election, and allegations of fraud in that election emboldened a more hard-line wing of the opposition to launch an extended cycle of protests in early 2014. While the protests subsided over time, they would return on a grand scale in 2016, substantially in response to the government's blocking opposition attempts to trigger a referendum to recall Maduro from office. These cycles of protest, which involved massive mobilizations and semipermanent roadblocks, represented the biggest threat to the Bolivarian government in the protest arena since the 2001–2003 period.

The government's troubles were greatly accentuated by a subsequent economic collapse, stemming from both long-term macroeconomic and fiscal mismanagement and a steep fall in global oil prices that began in the middle of 2014. Despite the opposition's reinvigorated contentious activity, the Maduro government maintained decent approval ratings up through mid-2014 and looked to have successfully stalemated the new wave of protest. The collapse of global oil prices plunged Venezuela into a massive recession, also marked by growing scarcities of basic goods, which turned public opinion sharply against the government and drove the opposition to a historic rout in the 2015 legislative elections. In the following year, the economy further collapsed in tragic ways, leading to hyperinflation, widespread hunger, and unprecedented deprivation. Meanwhile, political tensions ratcheted up, as the Maduro government effectively acted as if the legislature possessed no power while using its hold over the Supreme Court to thwart opposition attempts to trigger a constitutional provision to hold a referendum on recalling the president. In sum, the government came under very high levels of threat – truly unprecedented levels – in both the protest and electoral arenas during this period.

9.7.1 Colectivos and UBCh

The government's response in terms of state mobilization during this period was to reinvigorate or create new groups composed of extreme loyalists that had little to do with local governance and were explicitly geared toward action in the protest and electoral arenas. After the formation of the PSUV, the government

had begun to experiment with the creation of formal local party organizations to augment the more informally affiliated, albeit very numerous and well-resourced, Communal Councils. In 2009, assemblies were held across the country to begin the process of forming “Socialist Patrols,” local groups of activists that would be individually matched to every voting center in the country and responsible for electoral mobilization within that territory. While active in certain elections, however, these Socialist Patrols had never been fully institutionalized within the party, and many had become defunct.

After the death of Chávez in early 2013, and with a new presidential election now scheduled, the PSUV launched a major initiative to restructure and reinvigorate its formal local party organization through the creation of the UBCh, which would become the new base organizational unit of the party. The push to create UBCh was clearly motivated by the death of Chávez and the realization among leaders of the Bolivarian Movement that the opposition threat in the electoral arena would be heightened. But the UBCh were not just another temporary iteration of local party organization like the Socialist Patrols. Rather, they were intended to be a “permanent element of propaganda and mobilization” that would “strengthen and expand the vanguard” of the Bolivarian Revolution every day” and which should assume some ill-defined responsibilities in local governance in their communities. In effect, the UBCh were designed to be highly politicized organizations that would be agents of electoral mobilization but also capable of acting the protest arena and establishing permanent positions within communities. This put them into potential conflict with Communal Councils operating in the same neighborhoods. In the Bolivarian mediascape, substantial debate surrounded the question of what the relationship between the Councils and UBCh should be and whether the UBCh were undermining the “popular power” exercised by the Councils.

The second consequential form of state mobilization during this period was the activation, or reactivation, of a more informal set of organizations, many of which were rooted in the Bolivarian Circle initiative, known colloquially as *colectivos*. These *colectivos* are informal, highly revolutionary neighborhood-based organizations that view themselves as defenders of the Bolivarian Revolution, although they may maintain critical postures toward the government. Generalizing further about the *colectivos* is difficult. As with the Bolivarian Circles, the activities of a set of high-profile *colectivos* may not be representative of the activities of the broader population of *colectivos*. Many *colectivos* do not engage in violence and are simply groups of militant revolutionary leftists who view themselves as defenders of their communities and the vanguard of the Bolivarian Revolution. Nevertheless, a subset of armed *colectivos* came to play a salient and controversial role in Venezuelan politics in the 2013–2017 period.

Both the UBCh and *colectivos* were actively involved in standard forms of countermobilization, organizing demonstrations and pouring into the streets in

response to opposition protest cycles and as ways to rally support for a beleaguered government. For example, the Maduro government used the UBCh and colectivos as key grassroots mobilizational actors for massive national-scale events in late 2016 labeled the “Anti-Coup March” and the “Venezuela, Indestructible Heart Campaign,” which both sought to cast opposition attempts to remove Maduro as undemocratic, to blame the opposition for launching a financial war that was destroying the Venezuelan economy, and to rally the government’s dwindling support more generally. Similar types of countermobilizational events were also held in previous years during this period of elevated opposition threats.

The armed colectivos, and some portion of the UBCh, were centrally involved in the Venezuelan government’s heightened attempts to control and manage the protest arena through repression and intimidation. When massive protests first broke out in February 2014, PSUV leader Francisco Ameliach tweeted, “UBCh prepare yourselves for an immediate counter-attack. Diosdado will give the order.” The following months were marked by numerous notorious instances in which armed colectivos and UBCh violently clashed with protesters. When the opposition announced plans for a massive mobilization to protest the government’s blocking of an attempted recall referendum in 2016, Vice President Aristóbulo Istúriz responded by saying that the government would fill the streets of Caracas with colectivos and their “iron horses,” a reference to the motorcycles that armed colectivos have often used when making a show of force on the streets (Infobae, 2016). An extensive report from Human Rights Watch (2014) documents high degrees of collaboration between armed Bolivarian civilian groups – colectivos and UBChs – and government security forces. This collaborative activity took different forms. In some instances, security forces policing a protest suddenly disappeared, and colectivos or UBCh descended soon after to beat up protesters. In other instances, armed civilian groups and security forces operated side-by-side in forcefully detaining, and even opening fire upon, protesters.

Empowering a subset of colectivos and UBCh in this way had doubled-edged consequences for the Maduro government. The armed civilian groups allowed the government to exert a higher degree of repression on opposition protesters, therefore helping stalemate the initial wave of protests in 2014, while minimizing the degree to which security forces were directly implicated in the violence. While serious investigations of the violence would still conclude that the government was responsible for substantial repression, either directly or because they empowered the armed civilian groups, this more nuanced perspective is not necessarily dominant among Venezuelans or international audiences. In this sense, the use of state-mobilized groups to repressively manage the protest arena can be seen within a larger pattern in which autocratic regimes like Venezuela and Russia often engage in disinformation campaigns or other deliberate attempts to “muddy the water” in ways that allow them to get away with

certain types of behavior without facing the full consequences in terms of domestic or international opinion.

On the other hand, the *colectivos* and – to a lesser degree – UBCh proved difficult to control, much like the Bolivarian Circles of a decade earlier, creating various unintended consequences and forms of blowback. While it is hard to know whether any given instance of *colectivo* repression is sanctioned or not, it seems likely that the government tried to curtail their repressive activities yet was not able to fully stop the violence, hurting them in the court of public opinion. Part of the issue seems to be the limited ability, or willingness, of the Venezuelan security services to fully control these groups, with which they otherwise may act in concert at times.

Some *colectivos* also likely function as criminal organizations involved in the drug trade and racketeering, activities that may bring them into cooperation, conflict, or both with parts of the Venezuelan security forces. The murkiness of these connections was put on display in a sequence of events in October 2014. First, Robert Serra, a young rising star within the PSUV known to be heavily linked to *colectivos* – he had also been a central figure in organizing youth counterprotests in the 2007 protest cycle – was found mysteriously murdered in his Caracas home. Several days afterward, an armed standoff occurred in Caracas between security forces and a major *colectivo*, which left five *colectivo* leaders dead, including one very closely linked to Serra. In response, this *colectivo* went public with demands that Interior Minister Miguel Rodríguez Torres, long associated with close relationships with armed Bolivarian Circles and *Colectivos*, resign for his role in the murders, and not long afterward the minister was shuffled to a new post. While the true relationship between all these events remains unknown, they underscore the murky territory created when the government empowers and mobilizes armed civilian groups, which may not only play roles in the protest arena but which may clash with state forces or become pawns in power struggles between competing government factions.

The ability of Bolivarian governmental forces to control at least some of the *colectivos* further deteriorated in 2016 (Stratfor, 2016). As the economic collapse took on truly dire dimensions, marked by widespread shortages and hunger, some *colectivos* increased their criminal activity while growing increasingly disenchanting with the Maduro government, which they increasingly viewed as corrupt (Casey, 2016). Many *colectivos* exerted de facto control over neighborhoods in major cities, sometimes in cooperation with security forces but often in open defiance of them. While some residents may see the local *colectivo* as a source of aid and provisioning, others may view them as exploitative criminals empowered by the Bolivarian government. At the very least, this fracturing of control over state-mobilized groups in Venezuela further complicated and undermined the Maduro government's already tenuous ability to exert social and political control over the country.

In sum, the recent period has been one in which unprecedented threats in both the protest and electoral arenas led the Bolivarian government to emphasize the mobilization of a new set of highly loyal and politicized organizations, much more explicitly geared toward political action rather than local governance and, most ominously, much more willing to engage in repression and violence as a means to counteract opposition activity in the protest arena. While the *colectivos* and UBCh proved useful in some ways, helping the government stave off the opposition for the moment, they also created other troubles. State weakness in Venezuela meant that government bureaucrats and security services had great difficulty controlling state-mobilized groups once these entities had been called into life through the Bolivarian Revolution. The dramatic and tragic economic collapse of the country greatly exacerbated this dynamic, leading to an increasing fracturing of authority and control.

9.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the evolution and logic of state mobilization in Bolivarian Venezuela from 1999 to 2017. Two contextual conditions help explain important aspects of the case and differentiate it from others examined in this volume. The extremely competitive nature of the Venezuelan regime created great incentives for the government to use state-mobilized groups mainly for the purposes of proactive and reactive mobilization, as a means to counter opposition threats in the protest and electoral arenas. The weak Venezuelan state, in turn, has meant that the government has faced great difficulties in controlling state-mobilized groups, as bureaucracies and security services did not have substantial capacity to monitor their activities and credibly punish those groups for non-sanctioned behavior.

The bulk of the chapter then focused on explaining the logic underlying change over time in state mobilization, developing and testing a mirroring theory that centered on two propositions. First, the government's emphasis on infrastructural mobilization, most keeping with its ideological commitments, waxed and waned with the degree of opposition threat. The imperative of dealing with threats to power, through proactive and reactive mobilization, has clearly taken precedence over the use of infrastructural mobilization to achieve longer-term programmatic goals. Second, when mobilizing society to deal with opposition threats, the government has focused on sponsoring movements and organizations suited to operating in whichever arena of politics, that of protests or elections, the opposition was most threatening at the time. The need to respond to a shifting threat landscape helps explain why the Bolivarian Movement has sponsored the formation of so many different kinds of organizations and movements during its nearly twenty years in power.

This should be a useful framework for understand the logic of SMMs in other authoritarian cases. As the scope conditions make clear, authoritarian regime

type delimits relevant arenas of politics and whether or not incumbents are liable to face open challenges in the protest and/or electoral arenas. State elites in closed autocracies face a very different strategic landscape than in competitive authoritarian regimes, and the logic of their mobilizational choices will differ accordingly. The mirroring theory seems like it might produce the greatest traction, however, when applied within other competitive autocracies. Other chapters of this volume note that autocratic incumbents engage in reactive mobilization of protest-oriented movements to deal with opposition threats in that arena (Chapters 2 and 7). Others find that electoral authoritarian governments that anticipate genuine threats at the ballot box also often seek to mobilize society to help in electioneering (Chapter 10). A versatile and shifting repertoire of mobilizational strategies, which can be tailored to the needs and threats of the day, may be particularly helpful in ruling by other means.

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