

# Venezuela's African Agenda in a South–South Context

## The Cases of Algeria, Gambia and South Africa, 2005–2010

*Venezuela's African Agenda, an intention to diversify its oil partners as well as a search for a land where to export the 'Bolivarian Revolution', is a sign of the growing interest on the part of Latin America to strengthen ties with the African continent, and constitutes an alternative to the option represented by the BRICS countries, whose aims arouse suspicion among the poorest in the South. This article proposes an objective evaluation of the reactions this agenda provokes in three different African countries namely Algeria, Gambia and South Africa - as a way to measure its effectiveness and level of importance, trying to fulfil a vacuum in the literature that has mainly focused on the formulation and implementation of the new Venezuelan policy so far.*

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With the sacred fire of our conscience  
let us dry the tears of Africa  
but also those of Latin America  
for our tears become rain to start  
the sowing of the XXI century.  
*Hugo Chávez, Banjul, 2006'*

### Introduction

Venezuela's African Agenda intends to be a new model of South–South cooperation. This article explores which has been the African response through the study of the relations with Algeria, Gambia and South Africa.

South–South cooperation is a concept that involves activities in almost all realms of international relations. It can be implemented at the global, inter-regional, regional and bilateral levels.

Historically, it has been seen as the opposite to the North–South cooperation.<sup>2</sup> However, today we could say, along with Carlos Sersale, that South–South cooperation deals with all the issues that developing countries are facing, from their perspective (global governance, democracy and human rights, peace and security, economic growth and sustainable development), **'but in a complementary fashion with the rest of the world, with the ultimate**

end of self reliance, contributing to eradicate the dangerous aid dependency syndrome<sup>3</sup>. This explains the change on focus from the political arena to trade.

South-South cooperation was previously more political, looking for changes in global governance and in the global economic order, a battle fought at a multilateral level in different forums: OPEC, G-77, Non-aligned Movement, and the UN (law of the sea, GATT negotiations). However, this type of cooperation failed because it was too conventional and had a very broad scope for action. In the 1980s, attempts to cooperate at a multilateral level were undermined by the policies implemented by developing countries together with private creditors, and the frail economy of the indebted nations. In the 1990s, South-South actions dissolved due to the end of the Cold War and the expansion of globalisation.<sup>4</sup> Every day is becoming more focused on trade, investment, and technology transfers, which is implemented at interregional, regional and bi-national levels. As Le Pere<sup>5</sup> says:

The South is now trying to propel itself more assertively into the multilateral trading system as well as global markets, so as to reap development gains and benefits that contributes towards the key goals of achieving economic growth and reducing poverty.

We are rich in documents, ideas and recommendations for action. Although a great deal has been achieved in practical terms, the advances have been slow and uneven in relation to the needs and the underlying potential for South-South cooperation.

There are many objective and subjective reasons for this: the lack of established links; lack of financial resources and the absence of the necessary infrastructure; traditionally strong

links with the North; political tensions; similar structures of commodity producing economies; the lack of institutional mechanisms;<sup>6</sup> and the increasing differentiation of the South itself. According to Tom Weeler<sup>7</sup>:

Countries of the South differ widely in character and their interests may diverge greatly ... Even though these States occupy a common position on some issues and share certain their goals and ambitions, their interests do not necessarily converge, even in their relation with the developed North ... These differences lead to fragmentation rather than cohesion in the effort of the South to address its problems.

On this basis, the search for new political, economic and social practices represents a challenge to redefine new horizons in this matter. The imperative to know the different realities of our particular societies invites us to deepen the study, dissemination and promotion of the different experiences that take place daily on our continents.

The new Venezuelan policy towards Africa, known as Venezuela's African Agenda turns out to be a relevant case for study because: (a) it is a sign of the growing interest on the part of Latin America to strengthen ties with the African continent in the context of the fierce competition that is taking place among the traditional and emerging powers to access Africa's vast resources (the new 'Struggle for Africa'); and (b) it is an alternative to the option represented by the BRICS countries, whose aims arouse suspicion among the poorest in the South.

This article intends to fill a vacuum in the available literature which, besides the fact of being strongly ideologically biased, has focused mainly on the formulation and implementation of the new Venezuela's African Agenda, leaving

behind the evaluation of the different reactions it provokes, the only way to measure its effectiveness and level of importance.

The selection of case studies – Algeria, Gambia and South Africa – responds to three main criteria: (1) they represent different profiles of African countries; (2) they all have embassies in Venezuela, which is a sign of their interest in bilateral relations; and (3) they are the subject of a 'privileged' or 'special' relationship on the part of Venezuela, which can be measured by the previous existence or recent creation of an embassy of Venezuela in these countries and the number of official visits at a presidential level.

## Venezuela's African Agenda

The formal launch of diplomatic ties with African countries dates back to 1950 when Venezuela established relations with Ethiopia and Egypt during the rule of dictator General Marcos Pérez Jimenez. During the years of the fight for African independence in the 1960s, the new Venezuelan democratic government supported the right to independence and self-determination of the African territories under colonial rule and the right of the new states to join and participate in the activities of international organisations such as the United Nations. Within the frame of the Non-aligned Movement that involved all the so-called 'Third World',<sup>8</sup> Caracas argued that the extension of diplomatic relations to all African states was one of its central concerns. In 1998, the last year of the IV Republic,<sup>9</sup> Venezuela had ties with 30 countries of a total of 54 that formed the continent at that moment.<sup>10</sup>

However, one could argue that the relationships at that time were merely 'protocol', for the real presence was reduced to eight embassies

(Egypt, Algeria, Libya and Morocco in the North, and Nigeria, Namibia, South Africa and Kenya in Sub-Saharan Africa) served by a lonely and 'punished' official, while at the domestic service only two people dealt with African issues. With regard to the legal aspect, the Republic of Venezuela, from 1957 to 1998, signed fewer than 30 cooperation agreements with African countries.<sup>11</sup>

However, since 1999, Venezuela entered a new period of its political history with the victory of Hugo Chávez and the adoption of a new Constitution, which talks about a 're-founding of the Republic and its institutions'. The transition from the IV to the V Republic brought about a major shift in foreign policy on the basis of militant anti-imperialism, Latin American integration and openness to other geographic realities such as Asia and Africa, with the intention of promoting a multipolar world and drawing a new global geopolitical map. South-South cooperation is a central issue in the international agenda of the renamed 'Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela', through which it seeks 'to promote a dynamic interaction between our countries in order to face with our own resources, knowledge and skills, many of our common problems due, to a large extent, to systemic deficiencies, asymmetries and inequities in International Relations'.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to Africa, this new foreign policy took shape in January 2005, when a foreign office for Africa was created with the rank of vice-ministry under the direction of Reinaldo Bolívar, who is responsible for the conception and further implementation of Venezuela's African Agenda. The main objective of the latter was, initially, to increase the number of Venezuelan embassies in order to cover the whole continent using concurrent accreditations. The new embassies were opened at a rapid pace in Ethiopia, the host country of



**Figure 1** Venezuelan embassies in Africa. Source: MRE, 2011. Produced at AISA's cartography department.

the African Union, Senegal and Benin (2005), Mali, Gambia and Equatorial Guinea (2006), Angola and Sudan (2007), Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2008). (See Figure 1.)

According to Reinaldo Bolívar,<sup>15</sup> the increased number of embassies in Africa makes Venezuela 'the third Latin-American country with the largest presence in Africa, after Cuba and Brazil'. It is clear, then, that the African

policy of President Chávez means to be global. The establishment of relations with all the African countries is shown as a sign of rupture with the IV Republic. Indeed, as Forite<sup>14</sup> points out, it is more an institutional than an ideological rupture. We already mentioned that the historical tradition of 'Third Worldism' on the part of Venezuela was the arena where the relations started to grow in the first place, but the creation of the vice-ministry for Africa and the Venezuelan African Agenda has certainly provided them with an important impulse.

The opening of the new embassies was only the first step. Venezuela's African Agenda also looks forward to increasing humanitarian aid, the establishment of relations with regional and sub-regional cooperation and integration schemes, joint action at multilateral institutions, exchange of official visits at a presidential level, and the signing of agreements to promote cooperation.<sup>15</sup> The idea, as clearly promoted at the Plan of the Nation (2007–2013), is to help Africa to become a 'new pole of power'. For President Chávez,

... the construction of a multipolar world implies the creation of new poles of power that represent the breakdown of the US hegemony, in the pursuit of social justice, solidarity and peace guarantees, within a frame of a fraternal dialogue among peoples of the world, respect for freedom of thought, religion and self-determination<sup>16</sup>

The humanitarian aid is provided via programmes such as *Adopta una escuela en África* (Adopt a school in Africa) which has reached about 70 000 school-age infants from 16 African countries, and medical attention to children with severe heart diseases at the Paediatrics Hospital Dr Gilberto Rodríguez Ochoa in Caracas.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the establishment of relations with regional organisations, in December 2005 Venezuela became an observer of the African Union. In 2006, Caracas signed a similar protocol with the League of Arab States based in Egypt, which includes ten African countries. In 2009, Venezuela entered, again as an observer, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Simultaneously, Caracas is constantly seeking opportunities to create strategic alliances for the defence of common interests within the framework of multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations. This the Bolivarian government wishes seriously to see reformed – as well as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), organisms which, in Venezuelan official's opinion, currently favor the hegemony of Western powers.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, presidential diplomacy has in fact become an essential tool for achieving the objectives of Venezuelan foreign policy in its approach to Africa.<sup>19</sup> President Hugo Chávez has been in Gambia, Mali, Benin, Angola and South Africa in Sub-Saharan Africa, and has established an active contact with Algeria and Libya (at the time of the late Muammar Gaddafi) in the North. The African Union summits in Banjul (2006) and in Tripoli (2009) allowed him to meet most of its African counterparts and speak directly to them in assembly.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the legal aspect, important for the continuity of plans over the vagaries of politics, the balance is 40 framework agreements, which have resulted in about 200 complementary treaties in various areas, with an accent on the energy and social sectors, with the clear intention of strengthening its ties with oil-producing countries (OPEC and non-OPEC)

while exporting the 'Bolivarian Revolution', which encourages the use of the oil rent to the benefit of the people through different social programmes.<sup>21</sup> These agreements were mostly signed with countries like Libya, Algeria, Egypt, Gambia, Mali and South Africa.<sup>22</sup>

Bilateral and multilateral activity between Venezuela and Africa have been positively involving different government agencies in Venezuela such as the ministries of Culture; of Higher Education and the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Foundation (FUNDAYACUCHO); Energy and Petroleum; Commerce; Basic Industries; Agriculture; Health; Communication and Information; and the National Integrated Customs and Tax Administration (SENIAT), among others.<sup>23</sup> Above all it is worth noting the intention of the Venezuelan government to incorporate the people.

The 'People's Diplomacy' is one of the guidelines in practice with the African continent. Diplomacy, according to the dictionary, is the science of international relations and interests, normally handled by the governments of individual states. If we add the word *people*, the concept shifts to a direct exchange between men and women from different cultures. For the Venezuelan government, People's Diplomacy aims to strengthen the base of the regional integration process and the programmes of South-South cooperation by facilitating the interaction between communities and social movements, and their participation in the design, planning, execution, control and monitoring of public policies in this area. It is not intended to replace traditional diplomacy conducted by the states and governments, but rather to complement it by working in parallel with it, thus contributing to direct and alternate paths to the official bureaucracies.<sup>24</sup>

Behind the highlighted objectives of Venezuela's African Agenda is the desire to

strengthen the knowledge about Africa in Venezuela, and to open spaces for social movements from both sides to meet.<sup>25</sup> Related to this, it is worth mentioning the creation of the *Cátedra libre África* (African Chair) in 14 public universities, and other programmes for basic education, such as *África va a la escuela* (Africa goes to school); *Venezuela y África una sola Patria* (Venezuela and Africa, one nation); the organisation of major events, such as the *Festival Cultural con los Pueblos de África* (Cultural Festival with the African Peoples); and the II *Cumbre África-América del Sur* (Africa-South America or ASA Summit).<sup>26</sup>

In November 2005, the Teatro Teresa Carreño opened the *I Festival Cultural con los Pueblos de África* with the participation of 16 African and four South American countries. The event was repeated in November 2007 and for the third time in September 2009, as part of the second ASA Summit. Intellectuals, teachers, students, women's groups, and cultural and social movements gathered in Caracas in an activity listed as 'pioneering and far-reaching'.<sup>27</sup>

Another aspect of this policy is the increasing exchange of students. In Venezuela there are around 350 young African people from 20 African countries (Angola, Benin, Cape Verde, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Western Sahara, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone and Togo) studying medicine and social sciences. On the other hand, more than 100 Venezuelan technicians have gone to Algeria and Egypt to specialise in the energy sector.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, ideology plays an important role in all of the above. The projection of the achievements of the 'Bolivarian Revolution' in Africa is always present implicitly in most of the actions and programmes undertaken.<sup>29</sup>

But what has been the African response? We can have an idea by looking at the profile of the relations with the selected countries within the context of the broad lines of their foreign policies.

### Algeria's Foreign Policy and its Relations with Venezuela: An Oil Identity

Algeria's actions at international level have been an effective instrument for promoting its interests in the framework of the strategic choices and founding principles of its foreign policy, which are closely related to its multiple identities.

Regarding this last point it should be noted that in June 1966 Houari Boumediene, then head of government of the Revolutionary Council, said: 'Algeria belongs to particular political communities: it belongs to the Arab Maghreb, the African community and the Arab community and the Third World'.<sup>30</sup> Algeria indeed feels a close bond with the poorest countries, victims of imperialism, and has expressed its desire to work together towards the formation of a new world order.<sup>31</sup> Both Boumediene and Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Minister of Foreign Affairs during Boumediene's term, had clear statements about it:

Based on the policy of relying on ourselves and therefore on the mobilization of our own resources, our aim towards development cannot be achieved unless it is placed within the framework of international solidarity mainly with the countries of the "Third World" to which we belong, For the common interests and destiny that binds us to the rest of the world is a permanent reality, despite the efforts of those trying to raise contradictions between us to disperse our ranks.<sup>32</sup>

Within the 'Third World', between the incomparable heroism of Vietnam and Cuba's stubborn revolutionary pride, Algeria is another anti-imperialist bastion, a light of hope for it is carrying the torch of freedom.<sup>33</sup>

It is in this perspective that we should see their strong support for the creation of OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum-exporting Countries), – a sign of what we could call an 'oil identity'. This relates Alger to Caracas in two senses: ideologically and as oil-producing countries. In fact, since taking office in 1999, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has worked to revamp the 'anti-imperialist' ideal through improved and more extensive relations with the South, including Venezuela, with which he shares an ideological affinity as well as the same interests as oil-producing countries, since the time of the founding of OPEC.

According to Alejandro Colas, Bouteflika's idea is to go beyond the historical interdependence with Europe in two different ways – (1) opening Algeria to the US and the G-20; and (2) enhancing its role in Africa. These changes are reflected in its domestic policy of national reconciliation and economic recovery. To this author, the difficulty lies in reconciling these two objectives, but he highlights the opening of the oil sector as the key to this new strategy. He states:

The great challenge of Bouteflika and his followers has been to reconcile the objectives of national reconciliation and economic recovery, because without the restoration of peace there will be no recovery. However, the path chosen for this recovery [greater integration into the world market] may still alter the restoration of civil rights and peace in Algeria ... he is actively courting foreign investment in an attempt to create jobs and modernize the country's economic infrastructure. His diplomacy leads



toward positioning Algeria as an 'emerging market' to guarantee a high profit potential of firms willing to bet on the future of the country. And the hydrocarbon sector has been at the forefront of this process.<sup>34</sup>

The relations with Venezuela date back to 23 March 1971. That day, the representatives of Algeria and Venezuela at the United Nations were authorised to make the formal exchange of notes.<sup>35</sup> However, the embassy of Venezuela in Algeria did not open its doors until 1973, and the one in Venezuela only opened in 1979. Since then, bilateral relations have undergone a significant evolution. They have even been described as 'excellent and strategic' since 1999, following the start of Chávez's and Bouteflika's terms,<sup>36</sup> partly due to the 'good chemistry' between the two presidents, which was acknowledged by Ambassador Bladehane in an interview on 15 December 2009. But this, of course, would be just a curious detail, except for the coincidence of interests in the defence and projection of the South in general and as oil-producing countries in the framework of OPEC, which has already been mentioned.

There is a consultation mechanism that has facilitated the political dialogue since 2000 and the same is reflected even within the United Nations, says Bladehane.<sup>37</sup> In the economic field and trade, however, exchanges between the two countries remain below the respective potentials. In the words of the ambassador (2010):

Political relations are at an excellent level. We cannot say the same in regard of trade or investment. We will have to work to diversify our economical ties even in the energy sector, due to the fact that we manage different technologies. Venezuelan oil is heavy while the Algerian is very light. We cannot incur in refining heavy

oil without risk. But we can find a formula in the area of gas.

Despite this technical problem, it is with Algeria that cooperation in the oil sector has progressed. It consists mainly of sharing information and experiences, while stressing the importance of common positions in summits such as OPEC, the Conference of Energy Ministers of Africa Latin America and the Caribbean (AFROLAC), and the Latin American Energy Organisation (OLADE). The last agreement, signed in 2007, looks forward to direct cooperation between the two national oil companies – SONTRACH and PDVSA.<sup>38</sup>

It is important to add that it is within the energy sector that the first step in academic exchange has been taken. It is worth mentioning because the academic exchange is an important way to measure the impact of the bilateral relations at the people level, defined earlier as 'people's diplomacy'.

According to Ambassador Bladehane, there are still no Algerian students in Venezuela, but the two countries have already signed a general agreement on culture and education, and they are negotiating another more specific one for the equivalence of diplomas and a possible exchange programme for teachers and students.

### **Gambia's Foreign Policy and its Relations with Venezuela: Weaving South-South Cooperation?**

Gambia is an example of the fact that political independence not always breaks the strong bonds of economic dependence which, among other things, strengthens its foreign policy.

Gowan and Gottwald wrote in 1975<sup>39</sup> that the fickle behaviour in international relations

of small states is explained by their need to ensure a proper functioning of its internal structure, which makes its foreign policy a 'survival mechanism'. In the case of Gambia, this approach seems appropriate. This small, extremely poor West African country has always depended on outside help to get ahead, but the profile of the 'benefactors' (either countries or agencies) has changed so much over its short-lived independence that Minteh<sup>40</sup> does not hesitate in pointing out the 'double play' as the outstanding feature of its foreign policy. Furthermore, not even the religious variable escapes this 'double play',<sup>41</sup> as rightly stated by Darboe:<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Gambia's political elite turned first to the metropolis and then to the Western powers, but did not hesitate to look away when they turned their backs. Neither doubted the different presidents when the moment came to use or disregard Islam, depending on the interests at stake.

The initial ties with Great Britain, the ancient metropolis, make sense, especially given that, as noted by Sallah,<sup>42</sup> the negotiation of autonomy was offered in a friendly context. However, many of its promises turned out to be false, and some of the sponsored projects ended in total disaster. Banjul had to look elsewhere, and since the US, the EU, the IMF and the World Bank were looming on the horizon, it took advantage of that. At the same time some Muslim countries offered their help, such as Libya (under Gaddafi's regime), which began an ambitious project to develop transport. President Jawara accepted this gesture, but the idea was never to surrender unconditionally. Although he owed his political success to his Islamic affiliation, his conception of religion was quite moderate, so he did not hesitate when he had to give up Libyan support due to the fact that this country asked Banjul to forget

all about its plans to develop the beer industry, considering that the consumption of liquor was contrary to the values of Islam.<sup>43</sup>

However, after the coup of 1994, when the West and the most important international organisations decided to impose economic sanctions on the new government, President Jammeh again turned his eyes to Libya, and moreover, willingly accepted the hands that tended Taiwan and Cuba in a 'left turn', understandable within the context of growing anti-America ideas fuelled by the radicalisation of the Islamic faith that took place in the first phase of his government.<sup>44</sup> Jammeh, who made a conscious use of Islamic symbols to entrench himself in power, opened the door to fundamentalism by supporting the Wahhabists in what was considered a mutually beneficial relationship<sup>45</sup>.

However, circumstances led to new and unpredictable changes in the foreign policy of Jammeh. Given the strong economic problems plaguing the country after his victory in the presidential elections in 2001 – which took place barely a month after the attacks of September 11 – Jammeh was in favour of a rapprochement with the US, a country with which he sought to ingratiate himself through open statements in support of its war against terrorism, a fact that analysts quickly interpreted as a new but failed attempt to get fresh money.<sup>46</sup> Truth is that the 'honeymoon' with Washington did not last long due to the violation of human rights in Gambia. Since 2005, Banjul has been gradually consolidating a strategic alliance with countries like Iran, Venezuela and China.

According to the regional press, Jammeh decided to open the country to Chinese investments despite its historic ties with Taiwan.<sup>47</sup> The proximity to Teheran and Caracas was evident during the African Union Summit 2006

held in Banjul, in which Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez were his 'guests of honour'.<sup>48</sup>

With this invitation, the Venezuelan president became the first foreign leader to address the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. At that summit, 'the Africans had the opportunity to learn about the proposals and ideals of the government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and its renewed interest in fellowship with Africa', as the report of Bolívar states.<sup>49</sup>

Gambia and Venezuela established diplomatic relations on 17 August 1974 through the Gambian ambassador to the United States and the Ambassador of Venezuela in Senegal,<sup>50</sup> but the embassies in Banjul and Caracas are relatively new. They were inaugurated in 2008 and 2009 respectively.<sup>51</sup> The ambassador in Caracas is Bala Garba Jahumpa, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, which is a clear sign of the importance given in Banjul to this embassy.

In an interview in July 2011, the Venezuelan ambassador in Gambia, Lourdes Perez, defined the relationship as 'very dynamic and successful according to its social impact'. She points out that the priority is 'the welfare of the people and the fight against poverty', which explains the reason why the work in Banjul started by ensuring health and education. But, as she highlights, progress is being made in other issues as evidenced by the recent agreements signed in the areas of customs and tax administration, civil aviation and the fight against drugs".

Despite the short time, bilateral relations have indeed an unusual dynamic. According to Reinaldo Bolívar, 'Among all the African nations, the Gambia is the one with which Venezuela now maintains a higher degree of cooperation'.<sup>52</sup> In his opinion, this is due to the encounters between the two presidents, which occurred in 2006 and 2007, and that the agenda

that was raised by the Joint Commission has been fully carried out. The Venezuelan ambassador agrees, noting as an explanation for the success of the relationship 'the political will shown by both governments'.

The ideological factor also seems to play an important role. On his visit to Caracas in May 2007, President, Jammeh of Gambia stated that his country was determined to join forces with nations like Venezuela 'to lift our people from underdevelopment', and recalled that in the past there was a bridge between America and Africa, but it served to slavery and death. Now, he said, 'we have a bridge of humanity and progress, which serves to liberate the South, where lives the majority of the people exploited by the minority living in the North'.<sup>53</sup>

Bilateral relations are thus described in the framework of South-South cooperation, and therefore as a counterweight to the unequal relations with the North. However, it is obvious that in this case, what prevails is a paternalistic feeling on the part of Venezuela towards one of the world's poorest countries.

The Gambian Minister of Energy, Ousman Jammeh, who in May 2009 conducted a working visit to Venezuela, said Gambia 'gratefully acknowledges the fruitful bilateral relations with Venezuela in areas like health, education, agriculture and energy'.<sup>54</sup> Gambia's ambassador in Venezuela, Garba Jahumpa, also appears to be very grateful. Apart from technical cooperation in agriculture and energy, he highlights the Venezuelan contribution of funds for the construction of a hospital and a new building for the only Gambian university, as well as for operations on Gambian children with serious heart disease at the Dr Gilberto Rodríguez Ochoa Paediatrics Hospital, and the 240 scholarships that have enabled young Gambians to study medicine in Venezuela. In his opinion, 'Venezuela is sponsoring a real "revolution"

which has nothing to do with guns and fighting, but with structural changes', a revolution that ultimately owes much to the profile and the relationship forged between the two presidents.

At this point several questions arise. The first is whether such a relationship in which one country gives and the other only receives is not a reflection of North-South relations. The second is whether it can remain stable over time. Lourdes Perez did not hesitate to say that relations between Banjul and Caracas are very different from North-South relations because they rely on true solidarity. In other words, help is not conditional. That is why, in her opinion, these relations are meant to last and will finally have a social impact which will result in a better world. For his part, Ambassador Jahumpa stressed that Gambia also gives – it gives English teachers and affordable prices for peanuts, their only export product. The truth, according to what happened in the period under review following the summary by year, made by the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry and the Management Report 2005–2010 of the vice-minister for Africa, is that Gambia's contribution is more important at multilateral level. For instance, Banjul supported Venezuela's bid for a non-permanent United Nations Security Council in 2007–2008.

Another equally important question is whether this relationship will be affected by a change of government in either of the two countries. In this sense, Ambassador Perez said that 'the national interest is or should be above the type of government'.<sup>55</sup> For his part, Ambassador Jahumpa said that 'a revolution is based on people, and therefore should transcend changes in leadership'.<sup>56</sup>

Believing that the key is indeed the 'political will' which decidedly will vary depending on who is in office, we lay aside the issue of the continuity of the 'revolution' and focus on

national interest and types of government, precisely because finally, it is more important to consider the image projected by linking Venezuela so closely to a country whose government is openly criticised for its performance in human rights. In this sense, the Venezuelan ambassador replied categorically that Venezuela maintains its relations with other states in the framework of principles such as the sovereignty of peoples, self-determination and non-interference in its internal affairs.

### South Africa's Foreign Policy and its Relations with Venezuela: An Encumbered Regional Power

South African foreign policy clearly shows a country proud of its history which made possible the passage from its isolation during the apartheid regime to its increasing protagonism in the international arena, from international pariah to leader of the African Renaissance, and an 'emergent power'.<sup>57</sup> If we talk about the division of the South, the new South Africa is to be considered among the 'emergent powers' together with Brazil, Russia, India and China (the so-called BRICS countries). This means that it has already transcended the stage of mere 'regional power' to become an 'African driver', defined in the literature as a pivotal state, an anchor country, a leader voice in their region, and also an influential actor in international relations.<sup>58</sup>

As published in the *Mail & Guardian* (7 January 2010), the BRICS 'wield significant diplomatic and economic clout and have become crucial powerbrokers in the evolving, albeit volatile, multipolar world order'.<sup>59</sup> They are the biggest economies in the developing world, and Goldman Sachs has predicted that, thanks to their rapid growth rates, their combined

economies could overtake those of the current wealthiest countries in the next four decades. They account for 40 per cent of the world's total foreign-exchange reserves, represent over 40 per cent of the world's population, and consist of more than a quarter of the world's land area.

This newly acquired relevance in world affairs is strongly influencing South Africa's foreign policy identity and strategic posture in a changing and complex global environment. Special importance is given to the 'economic diplomacy' to the point that a question put on the table by the specialists some years ago is more present than ever: whether Pretoria is a 'partner' or a new 'hegemon'.<sup>60</sup>

Precisely for all these reasons, Caracas seeks getting closer to Pretoria. If Africa is to become a new pole of power, South Africa will certainly be one of the leading voices. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in the name of the historical links, would like to walk side by side, and for that reason is trying to tempt Pretoria with the promises of Chavez's Socialism of the 21st century. The problem for Caracas is that South Africa has many other offers to choose from, and Spanish-speaking Latin America in general (including Venezuela) seems to be of marginal interest with the regional and continental schemes of integration (SADC and NEPAD) on the one hand and BRICS on the other, attracting all its attention and the scarce resources within the framework of South-South co-operation.<sup>61</sup> In other words, when it comes to South-South cooperation, the African neighbours and their partners at BRICS are preferred over other key Latin American and Asian countries.

An example of this is the fact that the only centre for the study of the relations between Africa and Latin America, the Centre for Latin American Studies, which operated from 1984 at the University of South Africa (Unisa) with

financial support from the Ministry of Foreign Relations, was closed without explanation in 2007, along with its flagship publication, the Unisa *Latin America Report*, which was edited under the watchful eye of Zelia Roelofse Campbell. According to an interview in July 2011 with Professor Andre Thomashausen, a founding member of both the centre and the editorial board of the journal, its closure was mainly due to political reasons – that the work being done was linked to the apartheid regime – which he flatly denied. In his opinion, theirs was 'a mission of mediation', since they used to offer relevant information on Latin America to all concerned people, especially in the business sector, while they organised seminars and cultural shows, contributing to the promotion of 'area studies' and the dissemination of the cultural heritage of that side of the world.<sup>62</sup>

The ties between South Africa and Venezuela date back to the time of the fight against apartheid. In 1964, when the Rivonia trial was held, Venezuela voted for Mandela's freedom at a meeting of the United Nations. In July 1991, during the second presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989–1994), Mandela had the opportunity to personally give thanks for the Venezuelan support of his cause. He first visited Caracas and then the city of Valencia, where, besides the love of the people, he received several major distinctions.<sup>63</sup>

Diplomatic relations were established through their respective embassies in Santiago, Chile on 3 December 1993 following the dismantling of the apartheid regime. In April 1994, Venezuelan observers attended the first multiparty and multiracial elections in South Africa. A Venezuelan delegation was also present when Nelson Mandela was invested as president. In Caracas, the government headed by Rafael Caldera (1994–1999) manifested its desire to open the Venezuelan embassy in

Pretoria that same year. However, this did not materialise until 1995. Three years later, in January 1998, South Africa opened its office in Caracas, headed by Thandeka Gcabashe Luthuli, the daughter of Nobel prize winner Albert Luthuli.<sup>64</sup>

At that time the bonds were mostly political, but there was economic exchange. South Africa exported pulp and associated products, followed by metals and chemicals. Imports from Venezuela revolved around oil and its derivatives. In fact, by 1998 Venezuela provided 3 per cent of total imports from South Africa in this area (DIRCO, 2011)<sup>65</sup>. However, according to the South African ambassador in Caracas, Bekisizwe Wisdom Gila, interviewed in December 2010, it was not until the arrival of Hugo Chávez to the presidency that economics became particularly relevant. His exact words were:

With President Chávez we are entering into the economic stage of the relationship, for me the most interesting one, and I am sure it is going to be the longest in time. It does not mean that politics is put aside. We will continue working on that too in order to strengthen our relationship, but it is the economical phase in which we are now, the one that is called to have a more profound impact in the societies of both countries<sup>66</sup>.

Indeed, with Chávez in Venezuela and the presidency of Thabo Mbeki in South Africa, relations between both countries entered a new stage, especially after the release of the Venezuela's African Agenda by the Venezuelan government in 2005 and the meeting of the two leaders on 16 September 2006 during the celebration of the XIV Summit of Non-aligned Movement in Cuba.<sup>67</sup>

The Venezuelan president visited South Africa in September 2008 and, together with

his South African counterpart, signed a Framework Agreement of Cooperation that has issued the schedule for the various ongoing negotiations, an energy cooperation agreement and a letter of intent for future cooperation in the area of mining. It is noteworthy that these are the only agreements signed since the formal establishment of relations in December 1993, apart from a memorandum of understanding concerning consultation mechanisms.

Apparently, the change of government in Pretoria which put Jacob Zuma in the presidency of his country, has not affected the normal flow of bilateral relations. In fact, President Zuma led the South African delegation attending the second Africa-South America (ASA) Summit held in Margarita from 23 September to 27 September 2009. In this context there was a new bilateral meeting at the presidential level. The occasion was propitious to sign the Agreement of Joint Studies for Mature Fields between Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA) and the Oil and Gas Corporation of South Africa (PETROSA). Nevertheless, it has to be said that the number of agreements that are awaiting approval from Pretoria, namely 17, is surprising. There are in fact too many when compared to the four agreements already signed, and this does not allow for the creation of the necessary legal framework.<sup>68</sup>

The trade referred by Ambassador Gila has not grown significantly either. Instead, it appears to be declining in some categories according to figures from the South African Revenue Service (SARS, 2011)<sup>69</sup>, indicating that South Africa's imports from Venezuela have gone from ZAR 322 219 721 in 2006 to ZAR2 731 942 in 2010. South Africa's exports to Venezuela, by contrast, nearly doubled, from ZAR149 604 695 in 2006 to ZAR273 530 628, but are very low when compared with the amount usually achieved by transactions

with Mexico and Brazil. In 2010, imports from Mexico totalled ZAR3 323 942 206 and exports reached ZAR2 116 485 957. In the case of Brazilian imports, they tripled those from Mexico with ZAR9 382 558 077, while exports totalled ZAR5 231 302 980.

It is worth mentioning that following the events of the period under study, according to the summary by year made by the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry and the Management Report of the vice-minister for Africa, Reinaldo Bolivar, it was found that, parallel to economic interest, there is a growing cultural exchange that has encouraged contact between the people. However, for the members of the Embassy of Venezuela in Pretoria, the greatest achievement in this regard is the close collaboration with the primary school Masana Mahlasedi, located in Mamelodi (1 700 students) within the programme *Adopta una escuela en Africa*. According to Ambassador Antonio Montilla, this and the inauguration of a bust of Bolivar in a square in Brooklyn (Pretoria) opened the doors of the Ministry of Education and the municipality, which for him is a sign of the importance of the direct work that is being done with the communities – the only thing that in his opinion guarantees that relationships will continue despite hypothetical changes in government.

The problem for Caracas is that this is not good enough to compete with the BRIC's agenda. This 'relative indifference' is minimised by diplomats for who to gain Pretoria's attention is a 'matter of work'. They assume with enthusiasm the task of identifying more areas of common interest and creating mechanisms to boost trade, investment and technology transfer, trying to include the different sectors of national societies. According to Carlos Sersale, ambassador of Argentina and dean of GRULAC<sup>70</sup> in Pretoria, interviewed in July 2011, 'what is lacking is precisely the academic vision which

would allow tackling the problem with a longer term view elucidating the potential of the relations regardless of the immediate interests of different governments'.

Nevertheless, it is important to try to find an explanation for this 'cold reception' to the Venezuelan proposal. The academicians say it is obvious that the scarcity of resources forces prioritisation of relationships. In this prioritisation, when it comes to South-South cooperation, Venezuela is relegated in favour of the action under the framework of the African schemes already mentioned (SADC and NEPAD), and the new but promising partnership with Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC), which puts South Africa among the emerging powers, allowing its voice to rise in the name of the rest of the South.

The various South African professors and researchers with whom the author had the opportunity to talk during a research stay in Pretoria and Johannesburg, mention among other factors, that what may dissuade Pretoria from closer relations with Caracas is the radical discourse of President Chávez, which attracts the youth of the ANC but definitely scares businesspeople, and which does not fit with the overall economic strategy of the new South Africa; the remoteness and lack of communication infrastructure (lack of direct flights); and the fact that South Africa has solved its energy needs, leaving Venezuela with little bargaining power. Some also mentioned that there was good chemistry between Lula Da Silva and Mbeki, which apparently was decisive in their relationship with Brazil.

### Critic Balance

The African policy of President Chávez means to be global. The establishment of relations with

all African countries is shown as a sign of rupture with the IV Republic. Indeed, it is more an institutional than an ideological rupture. The historical tradition of Third Worldism on the part of Venezuela was the arena where the relations started to grow in the first place. However, the creation of the Vice Ministry for Africa and the Venezuelan African Agenda has definitely provided them with an important impetus, with an accent on the energy and social sectors, with the clear intention of strengthening ties with oil-producing countries (OPEC and non-OPEC) in order to create an African pole of power in the spirit of the socialism of the 21st century. For Caracas, contributing to the acquisition of oil sovereignty on the part of African countries is contributing to the creation of a more just and balanced world, which is clearly against US hegemony.

It means that Venezuela is seeing in Africa a way to diversify its oil partners as well as a land to which to export the 'Bolivarian Revolution', considering that its model of sovereignty implies the use of the oil rent to the benefit of the people through different social programmes.

Nevertheless, the level of cooperation cannot be the same with all the countries, even within the framework of the South. The division of the South is now evident – some developing countries are emerging while others are struggling to fit into the international economic dynamics. The result is a 'collapse of the South', which can no longer be seen as a monolithic block.

The ideological and personality factors then become very important. They have certainly facilitated the achievement of agreements between presidents Chávez and Bouteflika despite the cultural differences, and explain cases like the 'special relations' between Gambia and Venezuela, where the latter obviously gives more than it receives. The 'good chemistry'

between presidents Chávez and Jammeh has undoubtedly fuelled the generous solidarity of the Bolivarian government. However, it seems that Caracas is not weighing the serious risk posed by such close relations with a government accused for its actions regarding human rights, especially considering that the Bolivarian Revolution is proud to uphold the virtues of 'participative democracy'. The truth is that the 'democratic' image of Venezuela is increasingly blurred when associated with these regimes.

If bilateral relations can be seen as the privileged means towards the exportation of the Venezuelan model, they are accompanied by various multilateral instruments, which imply some risks and structural obstacles that have to be considered as well. The differentiation in power of the developing countries may be a limitation to participation and even a potential risk in the sense that can harbour a kind of predation of the South by the South. In other words, some may assume to speak for the rest while most of the time they actually speak for themselves. The systematisation of the monopoly of their discourse is a risk for the poorer countries whose interests are marginalised. In the case of Venezuela, these leaderships may be an obstacle to the access of some regional integration schemes. The truth is that discordant and radical discourses like that of President Chávez may dissuade some important countries of the South to walk along with Caracas.

This means the excessive personalisation of Venezuela's African Agenda is, at the same time, the motor that drives it and a risk to its continuity. If its institutionalisation through the creation of the vice ministry guarantees a certain level of permanence in time, it cannot assure the maintenance of the rhythm and nature that have given it the actual government, for the good and the bad.



On the other hand, 'oil diplomacy' is vulnerable to economic crisis. A change in the price of the barrel may affect the budget considered for Venezuela's African Agenda. The social aspect of the Venezuelan African policy – its identity card compared to other African agendas – can not only be misinterpreted as a 'non-reimbursable aid' in the style of Western powers, but it does not actually contribute to the necessary search for self-reliance, which is said to be the aim of South-South cooperation.

## Conclusion

The search for new political, economic and social practices is a challenge to redefine new horizons in the framework of South-South co-operation.

Within this context, the Venezuelan African Agenda is an interesting case because: (a) it is a sign of the growing interest on the part of Latin America to strengthen ties with Africa; and (b) it is an alternative to the option represented by BRICS, whose aims arouse suspicion among the poorest in the South.

This initiative reflects the Venezuelan desire to create an African pole of power in the spirit of the socialism of the 21st century. The emphasis on social and energy sectors shows that, parallel to the interest in global geopolitics, Caracas sees in Africa a place where it can diversify its oil partners and export its revolutionary model, which uses the income from the exploitation of natural resources to benefit people through different social programmes.

The response of Gambia, Algeria and South Africa to the Venezuelan proposal follows its own defined interests based on their national project, although the Latin American country's oil profile, and its generous attitude and expressed willingness to contribute to the

construction of a new world order, promote its acceptance in a broad sense. But the post-colonial conflict faced by African countries between multiple objectives and limited means, the renewed global interest in Africa, the South division, the radical discourse of President Chávez and the inconsistencies of the Venezuelan African Agenda with the democratic principles that the Bolivarian revolution claims to defend, play against it.

On the other hand, the social aspect of this agenda – perhaps its most distinguishing feature and certainly the main characteristic of the relations with Gambia – not only makes it very 'expensive', but it can also be misinterpreted as 'non-reimbursable cooperation' in the style of the great powers, which does not contribute to ending dependency, one of the key aspects of South-South cooperation. Therefore it would be logical to think of multiplying the type of relationship established with Algeria in which the complementarities lead to joint activities at the highest level in strategic areas, without forgetting the necessary exchange between peoples.

To identify new areas of common interest and to create mechanisms to boost trade, investment and technology transfer while trying to include different sectors of national societies, therefore arise as the main challenge for Caracas in the years to come, not only with South Africa but also with the rest of the countries of Africa. Furthermore, considering that, given the excessive personalisation of the African Agenda and its dependence on petrodollars, its development could be frustrated if (a) the quantitative continues to prevail over the qualitative; (b) there is a variation in the oil price or simply a mismanagement of oil revenues; and (c) there is a decrease in political will due to a change of government

Finally, while bilateral relations can be considered as the perfect means for the export of

the Venezuelan model, it seems convenient to redirect the Venezuelan African Agenda to give it an interregional approach based on various existing schemes of political coordination and integration, but the ideological differences and the excessive appeal of President Chávez to be the protagonist would not endorse a change in this regard.

With these observations the author believes to have answered the main questions raised in the context of this research. However, there remains the concern to explore seriously the possibilities of the interregional approach and

deepen the studies about the division of the South, which makes it difficult to find acceptable ways for solving our common problems, considering that the BRICS usually speak for themselves. Radical speeches like President Chávez's are polarising and therefore not helpful either. Continuing to assess the situation in the light of these and new research lines is the contribution required from the academic sector to encourage the development of relations between Africa and Latin America, two very large and complex regions to be considered as monolithic units.

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