
Eduard Freisler, *Venezuela. Rozklad ráje*
[Venezuela. The Disintegration of Paradise].
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The journalist Eduard Freisler has been dealing with Latin American issues for years, repeatedly visiting the Latin American countries and offering informed texts to readers. He has, since 2015, paid systematic attention to Venezuela, replacing occasional visits by longer stays and systematic observation of political processes accompanied by a study of their historical roots and broader context. In doing so, he has been able to draw on contacts at every level of Venezuelan society, both convinced supporters of Chávez's twenty-first century socialism and its determined critics, and his book offers the readership an insider's view of a country that a quarter of a century ago was one of the most economically developed countries on the region, but at the same time was paradoxically threatened by its enormous natural wealth, large deposits of bauxite and high-quality iron ore, and then, perhaps most importantly, by the world's largest oil reserves.

Since the Second World War, the share of oil products in Venezuela's foreign trade has steadily increased, a fact that came under criticism in the early 1990s not only from the country's opposition forces but also from a group of soldiers whose leader, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez, attempted to overthrow the government in an armed coup in 1992. Although he was unsuccessful and ended up in prison, he was released on amnesty, entered political life and won the 1998 presidential elections.

Chávez's admiration for the person and regime of Fidel Castro in Cuba and his program of building socialism then became constants in the economic and political life of Venezuela in the following period, when after nearly two decades of the Chávez regime and his unexpected death, all the economic indicators collapsed, the production of Venezuela's most important oil product fell by a high percentage, its refining was virtually halted by the technical breakdown of the refineries, and the country became dependent on imports of oil products. It is also vitally dependent on food imports, which had been an important part of its exports since colonial times. The army which, with the exception of the dictatorship of Peréz Jiménez, did not have the same position in the country as

in other countries in the region, has begun to play an extraordinary role in political and economic life, and the police have become increasingly important, focusing their attention not only on rising crime but also, and especially, on manifestations of public discontent.

Freisler registers all these facts, as well as the negative features of the political development, where Chávez, after winning the democratic elections, seized not only executive power, but also legislative power, whose control he gradually secured by controlling the judiciary. The petrodollars, spent in part on various social programs, then strengthened his position among a section of Venezuelan society and provided him with support in his pursuit of the opposition, whose representatives were prevented by the judiciary from participating in political life. An important part of the economic policy of the regimes of, first Chávez, then Maduro, was the nationalization of a significant segment of industrial and agricultural production, with Cuban advisers in various ministries playing a significantly important role.

Freisler pays a lot of attention to the work of these Cuban experts. He writes not only about advisors to the police and the army, where he attributes to them a major role in actions against the opposition and a disaffected segment of Venezuelan society, but also about the corps of doctors, teachers and sports coaches, where he mentions two poles of their activities. Even if the teachers' activities are accompanied by their targeted ideological action, the improvement of health care and the quality of education, especially in the shantytowns of Venezuelan cities, is also accompanied by benefits for the Cuban regime in the form of financial gain; Cubans working in Venezuela receive only some of the funds paid by the Venezuelan authorities; the other rest is paid to the Cuban errary property.

Freisler's publication is not an analysis of a society where democratic traditions have given way to strong authoritarian tendencies in a relatively short period of time, but a description of the process of the disintegration of a national community into two blocks separated by the different possibilities of access to the conveniences of modern society. This difference is determined by the degree of conformity to the ruling regime. The latter, by controlling all the pillars of power in the state and especially the army and police, secured its existence for a virtually unlimited period of time, as developments after 2015 have shown. Although

the opposition won a relatively free election, it was deprived of its victory by the creation of a parallel body that, with the sanction of the judiciary, deprived parliament of the ability to carry out its mission. The disillusionment of a section of the opposition with developments following the collapse of hopes for regime change after 2015 then led to Maduro's recent strengthening. Freisler not only acknowledges this fact, but directly presents the example of one of the regime's critics resigning his views and accepting a well-honored position in the system, linked, of course, to membership of the ruling political party.

The work not only provides excellent information about the situation in a particular country, but is a definite warning about the processes that may take place not only in Latin American countries; victory in democratic elections may open the way to the establishment of an authoritarian regime, the dismantling of which may be a significant problem in the future, if it is possible at all.

*by Josef Opatrný, Prague
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