

Buzz Words and Venezuela

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“When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint; but when I asked why people are poor, they called me a communist.” –
Brazilian Bishop Don Helder Camara

President Hugo Chavez Frias’ enemies refer to him as a “terrorist” and a “communist.” Indeed, Venezuela’s current conflict could become a test for the meaning of words; not only the insults, but concepts like democracy. In Venezuela democracy, as Chavez’s enemies and the media use the word, means return to oligarchy. Human rights mean U.S.-style elections: an acceptable candidate wins and lauds the right of billionaires to own media and print lies.

In Venezuela and the United States the media routinely claim that Chavez undermined the constitution, compromised freedom and destroyed Venezuela’s economy.

Right-wing Latin American media and Miami’s El Nuevo Herald treat such charges as axioms; they don’t substantiate the claims. In Venezuela, the newspapers and TV stations that charge Chavez with censorship continue to attack him. The assault appears almost daily in papers like El Universal and El Nacional, on TV channels, and radio stations. In fact, Chavez has not shut down or censored media controlled by extremely powerful and very hostile tycoons. Gustavo Cisneros, known as the Rupert Murdoch of Latin America, owns Venevision TV and Venezuela’s Playboy Channel and is a partner in Coca-Cola and other multinational ventures. He and Marcel Granier, owner of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), own over 60% of Venezuela’s TV market.

These “beleaguered heroes,” intent on saving the republic from Chavez’ dictatorship, laugh in their penthouses. In May 2004, the opposition collected enough signatures to force a referendum, but have not unified around a candidate. The referendum followed an unsuccessful coup attempt in April 2002.

During those less than two days, when anti-Chavez forces appeared to have kidnapped the President, Chamber of Commerce chief Pedro Carmona claimed he was president. Reporters from the major media didn’t even ask him. The unelected Carmona did, however, label Chavez an enemy of democracy, which he vowed to restore, with his cabinet of the rich and powerful.

Since that fiasco, some of the original coup planners have had the chutzpah to accuse Chavez of opposing democracy and call him a totalitarian, Castro-style communist/terrorist. The very people who perpetrated illegal violence to unseat an elected government now claim the word democracy. And the media does not challenge them.

One voice in the anti-Chavez chorus has a familiar ring to his voice. Former President Carlos

Andres Perez gives TV and newspaper interviews as an authority on democracy and good government. Convicted of embezzlement and having given the command for army troops to fire at his own people, this mass murderer somehow claims to occupy moral high ground. And the media accepts him as if the Venezuela conflict boils down to questions of procedure, not real democracy: majority rule.

Venezuelans overwhelmingly chose Chavez in 1998 and again in 2000, because they remembered what former presidents did – a memory that neither the media nor human rights groups seem to possess.

On February 27, 1989, Perez increased the price of gasoline and the cost of public transportation. Following an IMF model to garner foreign investment, his austerity policies hit the poorest people hardest. But Perez apparently did not expect Venezuelans to respond to “economic shock” programs with spontaneous protests, which erupted throughout the country. In some areas, rioters torched shops and set up roadblocks.

When the police went on strike, the government lost control. Perez called for a state of emergency. The soldiers fired into crowds. By March 4, the government claimed that 257 lay dead. Some non-governmental sources estimated the death toll at over 2,000. Thousands were wounded.

Perez, who called himself a socialist, first imposed draconian measures on the poor and then had them shot when they objected. The Caracazo as the event became known, not only destroyed Venezuela’s aura of stability but put an end to the political system that had replaced the ousted military dictator Perez Jimenez in 1958.

From then on until the Chavez victory, successive Christian Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI) and Social Democratic Accion Democratica (AD) governments had used the nation’s immense oil wealth to distribute drops – or crumbs – just enough to maintain stability.

It took the IMF and World Bank – with strong backing from the Reagan government – and its neo-liberal offensive in the 1980s, to push Venezuelans into action. They rebelled against policies designed to further impoverish them and reward those who needed it least. Although the 1989 Caracazo emerged as an unplanned response to a set of new measure, the uprising also symbolized years of discontent over government corruption. The Caracazo destroyed the shady Perez, the prestige of the two major parties, and it opened the door to a more radical politics, outside the party structure.

The Caracazo also had a profound impact on sectors of the Armed Forces. Some younger officers who opposed the neo-liberal policies had joined the popular uprising when Perez ordered troops to open fire. Officers like Hugo Chavez saw the Caracazo as a learning experience. Four years later, in 1992, he led a military coup against another corrupt civilian government. It failed, but Chavez gained sympathy from fellow officers and the government felt pressured to release him in 1994 after he served a short prison sentence. Indeed, in the 2002 coup many officers remained loyal to Chavez and his populist policies and, to the surprise of the coup makers, restored him to power within two days.

His subsequent electoral victories in 1998 and 2000 allowed him to begin the reform process. But Venezuela’s encrusted civil servants slowed the reform process by not carrying out decrees or obstructing them, which has left some poor people feeling frustrated over the

pace of the “Bolivarian process.”

In the documentary film, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” the class nature of Venezuela’s struggle becomes apparent. The well dressed, expensively coiffed women who banged pots and pans – the first time many had ever touched them – shout profanities at Chavez. Anti-Chavez leaders warn the rich women that their maids might be traitors in their own mansions, secret members of the Chavista Bolivarian circles.

The film echoes “The Battle of Chile,” filmed during the 1970-73 Salvador Allende presidency, which showed wealthy Chileans encouraging a military coup.

For the white elite Chavez represents ugliness. The man with Indian and African features has committed the unpardonable sin: redistributing wealth. He increased the percentage of the budget that goes toward public health (8%) and education, although still not up to the level of developed countries. He also stopped subsidizing private schools where the wealthy send their kids.

Chavez received 59% of the vote in the 2000 presidential election by campaigning against the IMF model that has devastated the third world. He shares this anti neo-liberal view with President Nelson Kirchner of Argentina, Lula of Brazil and Bolivian peasant leader Evo Morales. Chavez stopped the privatization steamroller that would have delivered Venezuela’s social security funds to private brokers and the state’s universities to education entrepreneurs.

Instead of continuing the “reward the rich and punish the poor” system, Chavez extended credit to small rural and urban holders. Rather than perpetuating the thievery and privilege that prevailed in the state controlled oil sector, he fired the overpaid bureaucrats and converted the revenues for the poor.

Chavez, in his first four years (1998-2002), actually lowered the inflation rate from over a 53% average between 1989-1998 to less than 23%. Venezuela’s oil industry, devastated by a two and a half month strike that began in 2002, has recuperated and has begun to pour profits into state coffers.

The recovering economy has caused rifts among the anti-Chavez crowd. Some believe that only violence will destroy him. Opposition leaders have appealed to Washington, claiming without evidence that Chavez collaborates with Colombia’s FARC and ELN guerrillas. Recently on Channel 41 in Miami, Eduardo Garcia, a former Venezuelan army captain, showed up in uniform to describe how an anti-Castro Cuban group, Comandos F4, had helped him in his violent plan to unseat Chavez.

The FBI anti-terrorist units in South Florida have not disturbed this group. Chavez has produced evidence that US officials cooperated in the April 2002 coup attempt and in more recent efforts to destabilize his regime. He has mentioned the names of Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega and Otto Reich, the recently resigned Special Envoy to the Americas.

Ironically, the U.S. government, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International’s accusations stress Chavez’ sins regarding press censorship and undermining the Constitution – that Chavez is anti-democratic. In light of the US coup planning and destabilization efforts, such charges seem misplaced – at best.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, along with the U.S. Government, have contributed not only to political confusion about Venezuela. By misusing the words, democracy and human rights, they have created a semantic nightmare. They seem to accept US coups and destabilization campaigns as compatible with democracy, while Chavez's efforts to make majority rule a reality by providing for basic substantive rights become an offense. He has not shut down, censored or interfered with the media or the property that belong to his enemies. You figure it out!

Landau's new book is "The Business of America: How Consumers Have Replaced Citizens and How We Can Reverse the Trend". He is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies and teaches at Cal Poly Pomona University.

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