

The Legacy of Hugo Chavez: The Revolution Within the Revolution Will Continue

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, March 07, 2013

[Information Clearing House](#)

The death of Hugo Chávez is a great loss to the people of Venezuela who have been lifted out of poverty and have created a deep participatory democracy. Chavez was a leader who, in unity with the people, was able to free Venezuela from the grips of US Empire, bring dignity to the poor and working class, and was central to a Latin American revolt against US domination.

Chávez grew up a campesino, a peasant, raised in poverty. His parents were teachers, his grandmother an Indian whom he credits with teaching him solidarity with the people. During his military service, he learned about Simon Bolivar, who freed Latin America from Spanish Empire. This gradually led to the modern Bolivarian Revolution he led with the people. The Chávez transformation was built on many years of a mass political movement that continued after his election, indeed saved him when a 2002 coup briefly removed him from office. The reality is Venezuela's 21st Century democracy is bigger than Chávez. This will become more evident now that he is gone.

The Lies They Tell Us

If Americans knew the truth about the growth of real democracy in Venezuela and other Latin American countries, they would demand [economic democracy](#) and [participatory government](#), which together would threaten the power of concentrated wealth. Real democracy creates a huge challenge to the oligarchs and their neoliberal agenda because it is driven by human needs, not corporate greed. That is why major media in the US, which are owned by six corporations, aggressively misinform the public about Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution.

Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research [writes](#):

The Western media reporting has been effective. It has convinced most people outside of Venezuela that the country is run by some kind of dictatorship that has ruined it.

In fact, just the opposite is true. Venezuela, since the election of Chávez, has become one of the most democratic nations on Earth. Its wealth is increasing and being widely shared. But Venezuela has been made so toxic that even the more liberal media outlets propagate distortions to avoid being criticized as too leftist.

We spoke with [Mike Fox](#), who went to Venezuela in 2006 to see for himself what was happening. Fox spent years documenting the rise of participatory democracy in Venezuela

and Brazil. He found a grassroots movement creating the economy and government they wanted, often pushing Chávez further than he wanted to go.

They call it the “revolution within the revolution.” Venezuelan democracy and economic transformation are bigger than Chávez. Chávez opened a door to achieve the people’s goals: literacy programs in the barrios, more people attending college, universal access to health care, as well as worker-owned businesses and community councils where people make decisions for themselves. Change came through decades of struggle leading to the election of Chávez in 1998, a new constitution and ongoing work to make that constitution a reality.

Challenging American Empire

The subject of Venezuela is taboo because it has been the most successful country to repel the neoliberal assault waged by the US on Latin America. This assault included [Operation Condor](#), launched in 1976, in which the US provided resources and assistance to bring friendly dictators who supported neoliberal policies to power throughout Latin America. These policies involved privatizing national resources and selling them to foreign corporations, de-funding and privatizing public programs such as education and health care, deregulating and reducing trade barriers.

In addition to intense political repression under these dictators between the 1960s and 1980s, which resulted in imprisonment, murder and disappearances of tens of thousands throughout Latin America, neoliberal policies led to increased wealth inequality, greater hardship for the poor and working class, as well as a decline in economic growth.

Neoliberalism in Venezuela arrived through a different path, not through a dictator. Although most of its 20th century was spent under authoritarian rule, Venezuela has had a long history of pro-democracy activism. The last dictator, Marcos Jimenez Perez, was ousted from power in 1958. After that, Venezuelans gained the right to elect their government, but they existed in a state of pseudo-democracy, much like the US currently, in which the wealthy ruled through a managed democracy that ensured the wealthy benefited most from the economy.

As it did in other parts of the world, the US pushed its neoliberal agenda on Venezuela through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. These institutions required Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) as terms for development loans. As [John Perkins](#) wrote in [Confessions of an Economic Hit Man](#), great pressure was placed on governments to take out loans for development projects. The money was loaned by the US, but went directly to US corporations who were responsible for the projects, many of which failed, leaving nations in debt and not better off. Then the debt was used as leverage to control the government’s policies so they further favored US interests. Anun Shah explains the role of the IMF and World Bank in more detail in [Structural Adjustment – a Major Cause of Poverty](#).

Neoliberalism Leads to the Rise of Chávez

A turning point in the Venezuelan struggle for real democracy occurred in 1989. President Carlos Andres Perez ran on a platform opposing neoliberalism and promised to reform the market during his second term. But following his re-election in 1988, he reversed himself and continued to implement the “Washington Consensus” of neoliberal policies –

privatization and cuts to social services. The last straw came when he ended subsidies for oil. The price of gasoline doubled and public transportation prices rose steeply.

Protests erupted in the towns surrounding the capitol, Caracas, and quickly spread into the city itself. President Perez responded by revoking multiple constitutional rights to protest and sending in security forces who killed an estimated 3,000 people, most of them in the barrios. This became known as the “Caracazo” (“the Caracas smash”) and demonstrated that the president stood with the oligarchs, not with the people.

Under President Perez, conditions continued to deteriorate for all but the wealthy in Venezuela. So people organized in their communities and with Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez attempted a civilian-led coup in 1992. Chávez was jailed, and so the people organized for his release. Perez was impeached for embezzlement of 250 million bolivars and the next president, Rafael Caldera, promised to release Chávez when he was elected. Chávez was freed in 1994. He then traveled throughout the country to meet with people in their communities and organizers turned their attention to building a political movement.

Chávez ran for president in 1998 on a platform that promised to hold a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution [saying](#):

I swear before my people that upon this moribund constitution I will drive forth the necessary democratic transformations so that the new republic will have a Magna Carta befitting these new times.

Against the odds, Chávez won the election and became president in 1999.

While his first term was cautious and center-left, including a visit by Chávez to the NY Stock Exchange to show support for capitalism and encourage foreign investment, he kept his promise. Many groups participated in the formation of the new constitution, which was gender-neutral and included new rights for women and for the indigenous, and created a government with five branches adding a people’s and electoral branches. The new constitution was voted into place by a 70 percent majority within the year. Chávez also began to increase funding for the poor and expanded and transformed education.

Since then, Chávez has been re-elected twice. He was removed from power briefly in 2002, jailed and replaced by Pedro Carmona, the head of what is equivalent to the Chamber of Commerce. Fox commented that the media was complicit in the coup by blacking it out and putting out false information. Carmona quickly moved to revoke the constitution and disband the legislature. When the people became aware of what was happening, they rapidly mobilized and surrounded the capitol in Caracas. Chávez was reinstated in less than 48 hours.

One reason the Chávez election is called a Bolivarian Revolution is because Simon Bolivar was a military political leader who freed much of Latin America from the Spanish Empire in the early 1800s. The election of Chávez, the new constitution and the people overcoming the coup set Venezuela on the path to free itself from the US empire. These changes emboldened the transformation to sovereignty, economic democracy and participatory government.

In fact, Venezuela [paid its debts to the IMF](#) in full five years ahead of schedule and in 2007

separated from the IMF and World Bank, thus severing the tethers of the Washington Consensus. Instead, Venezuela led the way to create [the Bank of the South](#) to provide funds for projects throughout Latin America and allow other countries to free themselves from the chains of the IMF and World Bank too.

The Rise of Real Democracy

The struggle for democracy brought an understanding by the people that change only comes if they create it. The pre- Chávez era is seen as a pseudo Democracy, managed for the benefit of the oligarchs. The people viewed Chávez as a door that was opened for them to create transformational change. He was able to pass laws that aided them in their work for real democracy and better conditions. And Chávez knew that if the people did not stand with him, the oligarchs could remove him from power as they did for two days in 2002.

With this new understanding and the constitution as a tool, Chávez and the people have continued to progress in the work to rebuild Venezuela based on participatory democracy and freedom from US interference. Chávez refers to the new system as “21st century socialism.” It is very much an incomplete work in progress, but already there is a measurable difference.

Mark Weisbrot of CEPR [points out](#) that real GDP per capita in Venezuela expanded by 24 percent since 2004. In the 20 years prior to Chávez, real GDP per person actually fell. Venezuela has low foreign public debt, about 28 percent of GDP, and the interest on it is only 2 percent of GDP. Weisbrot writes:

From 2004-2011, extreme poverty was reduced by about two-thirds. Poverty was reduced by about one-half, and this measures only cash income. It does not count the access to health care that millions now have, or the doubling of college enrollment – with free tuition for many. Access to public pensions tripled. Unemployment is half of what it was when Chávez took office.

Venezuela has [reduced unemployment](#) from 20 percent to 7 percent.

As George Galloway [wrote](#) upon Chávez’s death:

Under Chávez’ revolution the oil wealth was distributed in ever rising wages and above all in ambitious social engineering. He built the fifth largest student body in the world, creating scores of new universities. More than 90% of Venezuelans ate three meals a day for the first time in the country’s history. Quality social housing for the masses became the norm with the pledge that by the end of the presidential term, now cut short, all Venezuelans would live in a dignified house.

Venezuela is making rapid progress on [other measures](#) too. It has a high human development index and a low and shrinking index of inequality. [Wealth inequality](#) in Venezuela is half of what it is in the United States. It is rated “the fifth-happiest nation in the world” by [Gallup](#). And [Pepe Escobar writes](#) that:

No less than 22 public universities were built in the past 10 years. The number of teachers went from 65,000 to 350,000. Illiteracy has been eradicated. There is an ongoing agrarian reform.

Venezuela has undertaken significant steps to [build food security](#) through land reform and government assistance. New homes are being built, health clinics are opening in under-served areas and cooperatives for agriculture and business are growing.

Venezuelans are very happy with [their democracy](#). On average, they gave their own democracy a score of seven out of ten while the Latin American average was 5.8. Meanwhile, 57 percent of Venezuelans reported being happy with their democracy compared to an average for Latin American countries of 38 percent, according to a poll conducted by Latinobarometro. While [81 percent](#) voted in the last Venezuelan election, only 57.5 percent voted in the recent US election.

Chávez won that election handily as he has all of the elections he has run in since 1999. As [Galloway describes him](#), Chávez was “the most elected leader in the modern era.” He won his last election with 55 percent of the vote but was never inaugurated due to his illness.

Beyond Voting: The Deepening of Democracy in Venezuela

This is not to say that the process has been easy or smooth. The new constitution and laws passed by Chávez have provided tools, but the government and media still contain those who are allied with the oligarchy and who resist change. People have had to struggle to see that what is written on paper is made into a reality. For example, Venezuelans now have the right to reclaim urban land that is fallow and use it for food and living. Many attempts have been made to occupy unused land and some have been met by hostility from the community or actual repression from the police. In other cases, attempts to build new universities have been held back by the bureaucratic process.

It takes time to build a new democratic structure from the bottom up. And it takes time to transition from a capitalist culture to one based on solidarity and participation. In “[Venezuela Speaks](#),” one activist, Iraida Morocoima, says “Capitalism left us with so many vices that I think our greatest struggle is against these bad habits that have oppressed us.” She goes on to describe a necessary culture shift as, “We must understand that we are equal, while at the same time we are different, but with the same rights.”

Chávez passed a law in 2006 that united various committees in poor barrios into community councils that qualify for state funds for local projects. In the city, community councils are composed of 200 to 400 families. The councils elect spokespeople and other positions such as executive, financial and “social control” committees. The council members vote on proposals in a general assembly and work with facilitators in the government to carry through on decisions. In this way, priorities are set by the community and funds go directly to those who can carry out the project such as building a road or school. There are currently more than 20,000 community councils in Venezuela creating a grassroots base for participatory government.

A long-term goal is to form regional councils from the community councils and ultimately create a national council. Some community councils already have joined as communes, a group of several councils, which then have the capacity for greater research and to receive greater funds for large projects.

The movement to place greater decision-making capacity and control of local funds in the hands of communities is happening throughout Latin America and the world. It is called participatory budgeting and it began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989 and has grown so that as

many as 50,000 people now participate each year to decide as much as 20 percent of the city budget. There are more than 1,500 participatory budgets around the world in [Latin America](#), North America, Asia, Africa, and [Europe](#). Fox produced a documentary, [Beyond Elections: Redefining Democracy in the Americas](#), which explains participatory budgeting in greater detail.

The Unfinished Work of Hugo Chávez Continues

The movements that brought him to power and kept him in power have been strengthened by Hugo Chávez. Now the “revolution within the revolution” will be tested. In 30 days there will be an election and former vice president, now interim president, Nicolas Maduro will likely challenge the conservative candidate Chávez defeated.

If the United States and the oligarchs think the death of Chávez means the end of the Bolivarian Revolution he led, they are in for a disappointment. This revolution, which is not limited to Venezuela, is likely to show to itself and the world that it is deep and strong. The people-powered transformation with which Chávez was in solidarity will continue.

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