

Venezuela: Questions about Democracy and a Free Press

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First question: *Why?*

If Venezuela's government is a dictatorship, why have there been 18 elections in 15 years under the late president Hugo Chávez Frías (d. 2013) and his democratically elected successor Nicolás Maduro? Why is it that according to many international observers Venezuela's democratic elections are, in the words of ex-president Jimmy Carter, "the best in the world"?

If the government violates constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press, then why does it permit the 80% of the mass media controlled by wealthy capitalists to call for its violent overthrow? Why does it allow the same media to use photographs from other countries of police clubbing demonstrators in order to allege a "repression of peaceful protests" in Venezuela?

Why does the Maduro administration put up with the media's duplicitous claim that the protests of the mid-February to early May period of 2014 are carried out by a majority of Venezuela's students when only a tiny minority of the nation's 2.6 million university students take part — their main leaders paid or coached by foreigners from the US Embassy, the US Agency for International Development (AID), and the U.S.-funded nongovernmental organization National Endowment for Democracy (NED)? Why is so little attention paid to the media's assertions that the demands of this minority of pro-private education Venezuelan students are the same as those of the far larger numbers of non-violent students calling for democracy and free universal public education in Chile, Mexico, or Quebec? Why do the media not report that, in early May 2014, students accounted for only 7% of the 180 persons still under arrest for acts of violence in Venezuela, many of the rest being paramilitaries, snipers (*francotiradores*), mercenaries, private military contractors, street thugs, and drug traffickers?

Why, above all, do the mass media describe the protests as nationwide, multi-racial, and multi-class, when in fact they take place in only 5% of the municipalities and in largely white, affluent neighborhoods? Why do they never report that Venezuela is not a white nation but a heavily mestizo one with a distinguished African and indigenous heritage? Could that possibly be a reason behind the political opposition's attacks on the dark-skinned Chávez and Maduro?

Why do the mass media champion the two leaders of the protests — Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado — and not report how they have repeatedly instructed their supporters to "forget elections" and "set the streets on fire" in order to drive Maduro from

office? Why do they not report how in the mid-February to end-April period of 2014 the “democratic opposition” was responsible for 20,000 acts of violence, almost all the 41 deaths, and more than 500 wounded? Why are there no reports about how the government’s opponents poisoned the city of Merida’s water supply and burned or destroyed public health and dental clinics, election offices, university premises, government offices, metro stations, buses, automobiles, a daycare center, public schools, community radio and TV stations, state-funded low-cost markets, electrical installations, and forests?

Why don’t the media point out that most of Venezuela’s inflation and shortages — of basic consumer goods — are caused by the capitalists’ hoarding and intentional reduction of production and by smuggling? Why don’t they mention the following important news items?

- the economy’s improvement in 2014
- the past year’s *increase* in Venezuelans’ consumption of goods
- a rapid loss of support for the opposition accompanied by a big increase in Maduro’s popularity during the protests
- massive pro-government and pro-peace rallies like the May Day one of over a million people in Caracas
- discovery of huge arsenals of high-powered weapons in opposition strongholds
- new national police force community programs and prison reforms introduced to reduce crime
- The Armed Forces’ declaration of support for the constitutional government and condemnation of the *coup d’état* attempt in late March 2014 by three Air Force generals.

NEWS FLASH #1: *The mass media of disinformation serve as political agents in ongoing attempts at reversing Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution.*

These attempts actually succeeded for 48 hours in 2002 when the leaders of a US-backed *coup d’état* removed *all* elected officials, killed or arrested countless revolutionary leaders, and took President Chávez prisoner. The main opposition leaders of 2014 took part in that earlier coup. (There is also a small, ineffective left-wing opposition.)

To be sure, the right-wing opposition is complex. López does not attend the Dialogue peace talks initiated by President Maduro, whereas the twice-defeated presidential candidate Henrique Capriles does. Nor does López accept the government’s National Peace Plan, Commission of Truth, or new Human Rights Council, yet Capriles does. However, López and Capriles remain united on the ultimate goal: to topple the government and eradicate root and branch the Bolivarian Revolution.

NEWS FLASH #2: *It’s a revolution!*

The majority of Venezuelans are carrying out a very original revolution, one that is peaceful, democratic, participatory, anti-imperialist, and internationalist. Theirs is an historic fight against neoliberalism and for peace and democracy. This revolutionary process is by no means perfect, but it *is* real, and that is why the government is so demonized by counterrevolutionary voices.

The Bolivarian Revolution is an extremely complex one. For example, there exist different tendencies inside the 7-million strong PSUV — United Socialist Party of Venezuela.

Moreover, some poor people and even some non-wealthy students oppose the government — mainly because of its problems of corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies which Presidents Chávez and now Maduro so often have acknowledged. But the Revolution's 15-year trajectory, however uneven (sometimes with two steps forward and one step backward), continues to be, on balance, a deepening one toward social and world peace; dialogue; correction of problems; self-criticism; more revolutionary measures to benefit the masses; and international solidarity.

Actually, the extension of this deepening trajectory is spelled out in amazing detail in Chávez's six-year "Plan de la Patria 2013-2019" (at blog.chavez.org.ve/programa-patria-venezuela-2013-2019, the Spanish original being much more reliable than inadequate online English translations). The ninety-page Plan, which President Maduro has promised to carry out and is beginning to implement, was developed in consultation with Venezuela's social movements and even incorporated contributions from opposition sectors. The Plan's long-term goal is not to give capitalism a human face, but rather to replace capitalism with a participatory socialism specific to Venezuela, one based on the social movements, a communal state, and the nation's expanding 40,000 communal councils that, despite occasional failures, do for the most part decide democratically on social programs and implement "participatory budgets." Envisioning not a centralized socialist state but a decentralized communal state (quite original this part), the six-year Plan lays out concrete steps to overcome corruption, bureaucratism, clientelism, and problems of economic production and distribution. It includes measures to meet the needs of small businesses and implement the rights of social minorities, as well as ways to reduce the problems and distortions caused by an economy based on oil rent. It calls for more workers' control and social movements' and poor peoples' participation. In addition, it discusses achieving an "eco-socialist culture"; world peace; and preservation of Mother Earth and humanity. It concludes emphatically on a note of social activism and open-mindedness "to continue walking the path of Socialism, under the maxim left us in Antonio Machado's poetry: *Travelers, there is no path, paths are made by walking.*"

Ironically, the Bolivarian Revolution has benefited some of the bourgeoisie — a few people even refer to a "*Boliburguesía*" (Bolivarian bourgeoisie, an oxymoron). Venezuela's big bourgeoisie still controls two thirds of the economy but it is politically weak in comparison with other social forces and economically weak in comparison with the powerful magnates of foreign capital upon whom it depends for its survival. It is a "*vendepatria*" bourgeoisie quite willing to kill — the way Chile's and Argentina's and most of the Latin American and Caribbean bourgeoisies did in the 1970s and 1980s and Venezuela's did in those "dirty war" years too — including the massacre of the massive uprising of the anti-neoliberal "Caracazo" in 1989, an uprising that Venezuela's revolutionaries see as a triggering event of the current Bolivarian Revolution.

The Bolivarian Revolution's ongoing reforms often violate capitalist norms, as in the introduction of controls over prices, profits, and costs of goods; the seizure of large landed estates and some key banks and corporations; the acceptance of takeovers of some workplaces by workers; the frequent hikes in the minimum wage; the use of oil revenues to benefit the masses; and the many laws and actions to improve health, education, social security and pensions, along with other measures to combat poverty, bourgeois privileges, and neo-liberalism's privatization schemes.

Key accomplishments of the Bolivarian revolutionary process to date include:

- a transformation of popular political culture — people feel like they finally have a say
- the largest decline in poverty in Latin America, according to the World Bank
- Latin America's lowest social inequality index
- radical extensions and increases in the minimum wage and pensions, including for workers in the informal economy
- elimination of illiteracy and hunger (the UN's FAO has named its world hunger eradication campaign "Hugo Chávez")
- free public health care for all, with the assistance of 30,000 Cuban doctors who have treated 11 million people and against whom protesters in February and March of 2014 carried out 162 attacks, almost burning two of them alive
- free public education, with free computers for school children and many other students and with 1 of every 3 Venezuelans in a population of 30 million now enrolled from grade school through post-graduate university — the fifth highest percentage in the world
- transformation of international relations and debates through actions building Latin American integration and economic relations based on human solidarity
- Venezuela is unique in that it has reached almost all the goals of the millennium.

News Flash #3: *The US and Canada are backing a counterrevolution.*

With an eye on the world's biggest oil reserves in Venezuela, US Secretary of State John Kerry has called Latin America "our backyard," apparently unaware of the "change of epoch" taking place just outside his back door. The US has funded Venezuela's rightist opposition with \$14 million in the past year and \$100 million in the last 8 years. US intervention in Venezuela includes the use of known terrorists from the Cuban mafia in Miami and Colombia's paramilitaries (while the US imprisoned the anti-terrorist Cuban Five for long terms -see www.thecuban5.org). The US continues to threaten Venezuela with economic sanctions.

Canada has followed the US lead, supporting the ultra-right, neo-fascist forces in Venezuela. Canada's 3 major political parties in Parliament voted a resolution for "peace" that held President Maduro responsible for the violence. Air Canada suspended flights to Venezuela. As Edward Snowden has revealed, Canada cooperates with the US National Security Agency (NSA) in electronic espionage to disrupt Venezuela and Cuba and monitor Canadian and US protesters. Canada's new ambassador to Venezuela, Ben Roswell, is an expert on digital communication who served previously in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Egypt.

The US and Canada are increasingly isolated in their claim that Venezuela is not a democracy. All the members of the Organization of American States (OAS), except for the US, Canada, and Panama, and all the members of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), have voted to defend Venezuela's existing democracy against foreign intervention and the attempts to break the constitutional order.

Final question: *What can we in the North do?*

We can intensify our campaign against US and Canadian intervention and ask the US and Canadian governments to stand publicly with Venezuela's people and their elected government and to express dismay at the repeated use of violence by some members of the Venezuelan opposition to obtain what was denied them at the ballot box. We can build on the last fifteen years' international protests against the North's interventionism, including

the tear-gassed marches at the presidential summit of the Americas in Quebec 2001 and Chávez's role there as a solitary presidential voice against the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), as well as Chávez's and Fidel Castro's leading roles in the FTAA's defeat four years later and in the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Spanish acronym CELAC) that excludes the US and Canada; Petrocaribe; UNASUR; and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – Peoples' Trade Treaty (Spanish acronym ALBA-TCP). But acts of human solidarity and for peace — domestically and internationally — must be ones of critical, not unqualified, support; ones to build unity; and above all, ones to listen and learn from one another, or to paraphrase the poet Machado, *paths are made by walking and talking together*.

Jim Cockcroft, a frequent public speaker on Venezuela and Latin America, is an award-winning author of 50 books whose latest book for Monthly Review Press is [Mexico's Revolution Then and Now](#). An Honorary Editor of Latin American Perspectives, he is also a poet, a member of various international tribunals of civil society, and a founder of the Collectif des mouvements sociaux québécois amis de la CELAC y de ALBA-TCP. This article is based on his talk at an educational on Venezuela and Ukraine conducted May 3, 2014, at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).

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