
Znet 14th November 2007

Venezuela's Hopes and Contradictions

by Gabriel Hetland

In downtown Caracas the contradictory forces at play in Venezuela today are readily apparent, literally on the skyline, where glitzy new skyscrapers vie with gigantic billboards proclaiming "Venezuela: Rumba al socialismo". Images of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro can be found on walls and t-shirts throughout the country, and hardly a day goes by without a fervent proclamation from President Hugo Chávez about "socialism of the twenty-first century". Yet the well-stocked malls and overbooked luxury hotels of Caracas suggest that capitalist enterprise continues to thrive in the world's eighth largest oil producer. This is the view of "Eduardo Pérez", a Cuban doctor working in a small town in the mountainous state of Lara as part of Barrio Adentro, a Chávez-initiated nationwide network of free health clinics staffed by a mix of Cuban and Venezuelan doctors. "Venezuela is a capitalist nation", Dr. Pérez comments matter-of-factly, pointing out that unlike Cuba where "even super specialized medical treatments are completely free", in Venezuela "patients must still use private medicine for many treatments". Yet things are far

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'Venezuela's Hopes and Contradictions',
14th November at Znet
<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=45&ItemID=14281>

from business as usual in Venezuela these days, with the impressive social and economic policies pursued by the Chávez government over the last 8 years demonstrating the distance separating Venezuela's current path from the increasingly-discredited neoliberal model of development.

While talk of Venezuelan socialism seems premature—according to Dr. Pérez, “socialism is [just] a phrase of the president”—Chávez has increased the government's role in the economy, reasserting state control over oil and nationalizing Venezuela's telecommunications and electronics industries. He has also significantly increased state spending on education, health care, and subsidized basic goods, as well as supporting cooperatives and other forms of “socialist micro-enterprise”. Though Dr. Pérez does not see Venezuela as the next Cuba, he is impressed with Venezuela's recent progress in health care, observing that “Venezuela has dramatically improved its public health [which] is much better today as compared to ten years ago”. The most significant aspect of the “Bolivarian Revolution” may relate however, not to the important but modest ways it has challenged Venezuela's socio-economic structures, but to the substantial process of political transformation currently underway throughout the country.

There are few places in Venezuela where this process has gone further than Carora, a mid-size municipality in the desert of Lara known as “Venezuela's first socialist city”. In 2004 Carora's mayoral election was won by Julio Chávez Meléndez, the candidate of Patria Para Todos (PPT), a small political party allied with but

organizationally independent of President Hugo Chávez. According to Chávez Meléndez, who is of no relation to the president, before his election “the city was run by the oligarchy”. After his victory, Chávez Meléndez reports that “a picture of my head in a frying pan appeared on the cover of the local newspaper”. In order to take on the local power structure—a tightly interlocking network of the church, the media, and economic elites—the mayor convened a municipal constitutional assembly to rewrite Carora’s municipal constitution, a process modeled after the participatory national constitutional assembly initiated by President Chávez in 1999.

As a result of this municipal constitutional assembly, the budgetary process of Carora has been reorganized along participatory democratic lines, despite opposition to this from within the mayor’s own ranks. “People thought I was crazy to give power to the people,” says Chávez Meléndez. Instead of the mayor and other political officials deciding how to spend municipal funds, these decisions are now made by 362 communal councils throughout the city. Chávez Meléndez comments, “After a community approves a budget, the mayor can’t even change it”. Carora’s municipal funding structure has also been democratized through the creation of 23 community banks, which provide the funds administered by communal councils and “are run by ordinary citizens, not specialists”. Eventually, the mayor hopes the banks will allow Carora’s citizens to gain financial autonomy from the city’s conservative economic elites, with “bank loans used to generate

community production and income", though progress thus far has been slow.

The process through which Carora's political and economic institutions are being remade holds out several important lessons for understanding the broader changes currently occurring in Venezuela. For one, it demonstrates that the success of Chávez's "Bolivarian Revolution", frequently portrayed as a completely top-down affair, depends upon what happens at the municipal level. Secondly, the opposition Chávez Meléndez has faced from within his own ranks illustrates a theme heard throughout the country about the reluctance of Chávista political officials to actually give up their own power and privilege, despite their rhetorical commitment to the president's vision of "socialist revolution". "We're fighting against the old state structure which is still around", says Chávez Meléndez. Finally, Carora's relative lack of progress in tackling economic inequality demonstrates the challenge Venezuela faces in moving beyond politically empowering the poor to actually creating alternative economic structures.

Despite these challenges, the success of Carora's communal councils has drawn widespread attention, including that of President Chávez. As part of his recent proposal of constitutional reform, which includes a controversial plan to eliminate presidential term limits, Chávez has been pushing communal councils as a way of restructuring local politics along more democratic lines. Supporters see the councils as a means of putting decision-making power directly in the hands of local communities, thus bypassing politically entrenched local

bureaucrats. According to the president, his plan to create communal councils on a nationwide basis proves that, "I am not concentrating power, but dispersing it". To critics, however, the councils represent Chávez's latest attempt to extend his control down to the lowest levels of society. In an August 22nd editorial the New York Times cautions that communal councils "would further erode democratic checks and balances by stripping power from state and local governments, where opposition parties retain some vestigial power, and giving it to entities dependent on the central government".

When she hears accusations that Chávez is a dictator, Lisa Sullivan, a former Maryknoll lay missionary from Virginia who has been living in Venezuela for over twenty years, never tires of pointing to the proliferation of educational opportunities that have become available since Chávez came to office. Educational programs offering training in adult literacy, high school equivalency, and specialized instruction at the university level are now available in communities throughout the country, free of charge. In 2005, Venezuela's progress in combating illiteracy was recognized by UNESCO, with Chávez awarded the International José Martí Prize. "What kind of a dictator would provide education to everyone in the country?", asks Sullivan.

In towns and barrios throughout Venezuela small groups of students, usually middle-aged and elderly, gather together several times a week to pursue the education they did not have access to when young. On a visit to a classroom in the town of Monte Carmelo, in Lara, the pride felt by a group of middle-aged women earning their

high school equivalencies was palpable. The women spoke of their joy at finally being able to read, write, and participate politically. "This president is the first one to ever take us into account," says "Lidia González", one of the students. Another, "Josefina Ruiz" comments that, "When my children asked me about their homework I couldn't help them, but now I can". "Maria Rodriguez", also in the class, expresses a profound sense of empowerment, a feeling that seems to be increasingly common amongst the poor of Venezuela these days. Hearing Maria's words, it is hard not to believe that something special is happening in Venezuela these days: "I used to believe the saying that an old bird can't learn to sing, but now I sing".