

A revolution reclaimed Venezuelans hit back

Rumours of worker run factories, defiance of US dictates, and a 'quiet' revolution are continuously seeping out of Venezuela. Can they be real in this age where the market predominates and communism has been declared dead?

Ronald Wesso

analyses developments in one of Latin America's largest and wealthiest countries.



Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez

On 11 April 2002 hundreds of thousands of poor Venezuelans gathered around their presidential palace to demand the reinstatement of President Hugo Chavez. He had been overthrown in a coup led by sections of Venezuela's elite and supported by the US government. Teeming masses filled the streets wearing red shirts and carrying red flags. The situation hung in the balance. The coup had installed Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce president, Pedro Carmona, as the interim president. Violent clashes between his supporters and chavistas ensued. Carmona's presidency lasted 47 hours. Venezuela's masses were victorious. Chavez returned triumphantly to power. And the capitalist coup plotters have never recovered.

Progressives throughout Latin America and the world celebrated the victory of the chavistas. People recalled the history of coups on this continent, which overthrew democratic and socialist governments and installed murderous dictatorships usually on the instigation of US imperialism. Here history did not repeat itself. And when it became clear that this victory was a deepening of a leftist revolution, Venezuela started to occupy a growing space within the hearts and minds of activists the world over.

The spectacle of a government breaking with neo-liberalism and defying US imperialism has become a main source of inspiration for people the world over. South Africa is no exception. The words 'Venezuela', 'Chavez', 'Bolivarian' and 'Caracas' are heard in hopeful discussions among left activists. However, gaining an understanding of the what is known as the Bolivarian Revolution must still be done. If, in addition to feel-good inspirations, we also want to draw lessons we must ask questions about the Chavez regime and the Bolivarian Revolution. A closer look at the Revolution may prove even more inspiring because Chavez is a socialist and calls Bush 'Mr Danger' to his face.

THE BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION

When Chavez was elected president in 1998 Venezuela was in the grip of mass poverty, neo-

liberalism and political corruption. Like most of Latin America it had gone through a Structural Adjustment Programme that intensified the problems produced by a long history of exploitation by Spanish and then US imperialism. Indigenous people and women suffered the most. The two main parties which had governed between military dictators offered no way out and were two wings of the same ruling class.

The Chavez government proposed to change this with a series of reforms. These were Venezuelan economic and political sovereignty; grassroots political participation via popular votes and referenda; economic self-sufficiency; instilling a national ethic of patriotic service; equitable distribution of Venezuela's vast oil revenues; and eliminating corruption. These reforms formed the starting point of the Bolivarian Revolution. A closer look at key reforms will give a good idea of what this revolution is about. But first who is the key figure, Hugo Chavez?

WHO IS HUGO CHAVEZ?

Who is the vice-president of Venezuela? Name any member of the Venezuelan government other than the president. What is the name of the political party that governs Venezuela? Even close followers of Venezuela will struggle with questions like these. It is an

indication of the enormous role Hugo Chavez plays in the revolution and its image. Why is this so? And is his pre-eminence a good thing for the revolution?

Chavez's status flows from four factors. The first is the origin of his party, the Movement for the Fifth Republic (MVR). MVR has its origins in a military conspiracy among the officers of the old regime. These officers wanted to



overthrow the regime and install a government more sympathetic to the masses. But they brought the organisational practices and ethos of the army into the conspiracy. This ethos sanctioned the absolute command of a commander-in-chief. As the commander-in-chief of the conspiracy Chavez inherited this status.

The second is the nature of the Venezuelan presidency. Historically Venezuelan constitutions placed few checks on the president. The 1999 constitution instituted by the Chavez government continued this trend. The president combines the powers of the head of government

with that of the head of state and can even appoint judges and pass laws against the wishes of parliament. Whoever is the president plays an extraordinary role in the life of Venezuela.

The third is the Latin American tendency for strongmen (caudillos) to dominate politics. Chavez fits the bill of the caudillo – a former soldier, clearly heterosexual, an imposing public speaker, a hugely talented and charismatic man. The caudillo tendency is complex, but it has its origin in the fact that the class that previously ruled most of Latin America was not located on the continent but in Spain and the US. These classes therefore often had to depend on 'strong' individuals to defend their interests. However, this tendency has assumed a life of its own so that often anti-imperialist movements had their own caudillos.

The fourth is the way the revolution is reported. There is an active conspiracy to suppress information about the role ordinary people play in social change. Many reporters do not do this consciously but most have been indoctrinated into a world view that sees history as the product of great individuals. They are therefore unwilling and unable to present an accurate picture of the role of the masses. And Chavez's pre-eminence in the media reinforces his status in the revolution.

BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION & ANTI-IMPERIALISM

The Bolivarians knew that to make inroads against poverty and oppression they had to assert

Venezuela's sovereignty against US imperialism. From the beginning they opposed and defied the main institutions behind US domination – the World Bank, the IMF and the US government. They inserted a clause in the country's constitution that obliges the government to seek the approval of citizens before entering into trade agreements.

The revolution quickly moved beyond Venezuela and started to rally the peoples and states of Latin America against US imperialism. Venezuela became the facilitator of international agreements that began to break with the neo-liberal framework of US and corporate dominance. Together with Cuba it is setting up networks that have the potential to assert the sovereignty of the entire Latin America against US imperialism.

ECONOMIC PROGRAMME

When Chavez came to power he did not nationalise a single thing. He did not expropriate a single capitalist, and neither did he promise to. His socio-economic programme consisted of two major aspects. Firstly, he diverted a proportion of the revenue from the state capitalist sector, mainly the nationalised oil company, to social welfare for the poor. This has taken the form of about 12 missions dedicated to improving healthcare, education, nutrition and general welfare for the poor. These programmes have drawn praise from the UN, Unicef and the World

Health Organisation.

Secondly, he made areas of state land available to particularly poor, indigenous farmers. A lot of this land had been illegally seized by rich Venezuelans under the old regime. The Chavez government took this land back when the new 'owners' could not prove ownership. This move has increased food security for millions of poor Venezuelans. All without expropriating a single legally owned farm.



Venezuelan oil refinery

This economic programme has been helped by the fact that the state owned the rich, revenue-generating oil company, most of the bigger manufacturing companies and much of the farmland before Chavez came to power. By directing these resources towards uplifting the poor, the government can improve the lives of millions without expropriating the capitalists. In its economic programme the revolution is therefore closer to the European social democratic welfare states than to the Russian or Cuban revolutions.

POLITICAL PROGRAMME

The revolution adopted a programme of participatory democracy. This has been its most remarkable and revolutionary aspect. Chavez has used his power to support and empower a mass movement independent of his government and capable and willing to oppose it.

The strategy is called 'parallelism'. Parallel to the structures of the old state, new mass formations are encouraged and equipped to take control of important aspects of social life. The welfare missions are an example. A Canadian reporter noted, "Unlike the populist caudillos who promised, and occasionally actually did things for the working poor, Chavez' emphasis and commitment have been to providing support and resources for developing their organizational capacities."

One of the most interesting examples of this redefinition of democracy is the funding of community organisations such as the Organizaciones Comunitario Viviendo (OCVs-Community Living Organizations). This is the most local level of a network of community, district, and municipal organisations at the centre of the revolution's project of decentralisation. These OCVs are made up of one member from a maximum of 30 families who allocate funding received from the municipality according to their needs. Autonomous decision-making at the community level and the broader movement towards decentralisation have combined with access to free education, childcare and healthcare to

politicise many Venezuelan communities. It has provided them with the impetus to lay the foundation for a more profound, long-term revolutionary transformation.

Free education projects provide education from basic literacy to university-level in classrooms in poor areas all over the country. Free childcare facilities are coming to more and more communities. A similar project known as 'Barrio Adentro' (Inside the Neighbourhood) uses Cuban doctors to provide primary health-care in some of Venezuela's poorest and most inaccessible hillside barrios.

This strategy has created the opportunity for the masses to push the government to the left towards greater democratisation of politics and greater socialisation of economics. A telling example is that of the recovered companies.

RECOVERED COMPANIES

The revolution started with a moderate economic programme. From early last year the working masses started changing that. Former workers at a paper mill that had been declared bankrupt and closed by the capitalists seized the mill and, with support from the local community, reopened it. The capitalists complained and asked the government to intervene. The national assembly considered the matter and decided to expropriate the capitalists. The mill continued to operate under democratic workers' management closely allied to communities.

This opened a floodgate. Soon workers started seizing other companies. The national assembly

could hardly keep pace but pressed on with legalising the expropriations. After some time it became government policy to expropriate and re-open abandoned companies. By October last year some 800 companies had been earmarked for expropriation. A movement for the recovery of companies was born. Workers in the state sector began to demand workers' management similar to that of the recovered factories. After a brief struggle and some experiments this also became government policy.

"Who is the vice-president of Venezuela? Name any member of the Venezuelan government other than the president. What is the name of the political party that governs Venezuela? "

The latest innovation is the 'companies for social production'. Workers have been discussing the pitfalls of previous attempts at workers' self-management. The danger of market socialism was identified where every company works for itself and competes with other worker-controlled companies. This moved workers to start 'companies for social production' where the goals of production are decided democratically by workers and the community for whom they produce. This has also become government policy.

An official in the Ministry of Labour explains, "Within the project

of the nation, which is the constitution, the necessity is established to make a break with capitalist economy that promoted greed, individualism, lack of solidarity. With the EPSs (companies for social production) what we are interested in is carrying out the project of the constitution.

It is impossible to explain how a sugar plant can exist here and belts of misery exist next to it. But the company never invested, never assumed its social responsibility. The workers at the sugar plant have to assume this responsibility. They have to attend to the problems of malnutrition, hunger, they have to open up the food hall put it to function not just for the workers but for the people who don't have the resources, extend their hand to mission Barrio Adentro, the Cuban doctors, do social work, give talks to the high school students, to the young people. This is part of a company which has social criteria, not like the monster that we see stealing labour power and surplus value from workers."

This opens the possibility for a socialist sector of the economy run jointly by producers and consumers in a participatory democratic manner. The Bolivarian Revolution is creating the space for the masses to open up such possibilities. They are doing so not only in the economy but in many aspects of social life.

LB

Ronald Wesso is a researcher at the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), and a former National Education Health and Allied Workers Union shop steward.