

Venezuela: fragile socialism in the making

Many socialists see Venezuela as a beacon of light for left politics. But how far has Venezuela gone down the road to socialism? **Devan Pillay** attended a meeting on socialism in Caracas, Venezuela and gave **Kally Forrest** his impressions.

Why did you visit Venezuela?

Samir Amin, the well known Egyptian economist and writer (currently living in Dakar, Senegal) is active in the World Forum for Alternatives (FMA). The FMA and the Venezuelan Network of Intellectuals and Artists in Defense of Humanity organised a meeting on the 'Transition to Socialism'. The FAM and the Third World Forum (FTM), which Amin also heads, had previously held smaller meetings of a similar nature at every World Social Forum (WSF), with themes on the Agrarian Question, the Unity of Labour, Democracy and others. They chose Caracas in Venezuela as the venue for a much larger initiative because of current developments there.

I first participated in the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, out of which grew a project on labour, which I headed with a former Swedish unionist, Ingemar Lindberg. Last year we published the fruits of the project, an edited volume titled *Labour and the Challenges of Globalization: What Prospects for Transnational Solidarity*. The Forum aims to go beyond traditional conceptions of labour. I was invited to chair the labour session of the Caracas gathering, with the book as a starting point of discussions.

The meeting aimed to examine how we can move forward to 21st century socialism. We want to move

on from authoritarian state models such as that of the USSR and also to move beyond social democracy. There was a feeling amongst some participants that there were too many statist (state as centre) variants of socialism and civil society's role has been neglected. So this was the starting point for many of us who attended.

Did you manage to come up with a different model?

Well, there was a range of different thinking. Delegates came from all over the world - from China, India, Latin America and Europe although there was a Third World focus. About 180 major activists attended. In the labour group there were some still in the old statist-thinking mould and then there were many who wanted to see a more independent role for trade unions from the state.

Language was a barrier although we had translators, but it was difficult to talk informally. Also the main outcome still seemed to be a reliance on the state as central to socialism as well as an emphasis on Third World nationalism. Thinking around these issues is still limited but it's a start.

So is socialism alive in Venezuela?

Yes, but its complex. Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan president, came to our meeting and spent five hours

with us one evening. It was the highlight of the week.

Chavez was elected president in 1998. Later an attempted coup nearly toppled him but he was reinstated and he has been more assertive about declaring socialism since then.

Venezuela's democratic transition was initially a top down intervention led by a charismatic leader who is supported by large parts of the military. Chavez himself came from the military.

Venezuela has similarities to the Indian state of Kerala, but in Kerala a traditional communist political party leads the process. This communist party has had to undergo transformation to become more participatory and democratic which accommodates inputs from ordinary people from below.

In Venezuela when Chavez came to power there was no political party. Various parties supported Chavez' candidacy for president. He then instituted a democratic process and developed a very democratic constitution. You can even see the constitution printed on maize bags to ensure that people are aware of their rights. Rights are also read to non-literate people.

So there is a mobilisation towards socialism, but it is not organised although various formations have emerged. Chavez has now formed a party, the Socialist Unity Party

Venezuela (PSUV). The Communist Party and centre left have not joined the party arguing that they don't want to centralise left power.

Chavez is open to learning about the best way to structure a socialist party and what policies it should adopt. He arrived at our session with a range of books he is reading and consulting. He is a self-made intellectual. He brought books like *Beyond Capital* by István Mészáros. He also draws on intellectuals and policy makers such as the former left-wing mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. Livingstone reformed

especially as organising a party is a process and takes time. The party is fragile. US imperialism is still a threat and right-wing opposition and militias are very active.

Does Chavez control the media?

The media often depicts Chavez as leading a one party state. This is a distortion. Venezuela is not a one party state, the right wing, for example, own much of the private media. Chavez is trying to organise the left into one party but has been advised by Fidel Castro not to copy Cuba regarding a one party state as

There is no sense yet of developing public media and a public broadcaster as in South Africa which is important for nation building. Also basic journalist ethics are weak, there is heavy propaganda on both sides.

What other threats are there to Chavez' socialist project?

At a local level within the PSUV there are some corrupt members and officials who are not delivering. Some left-wing formations won't join the PSUV because of this.

Chavez is attempting to strengthen and build local organisation and structures to ensure that when he is no longer in power, delivery and a pro-poor emphasis will continue.

Before Chavez came to power communal councils and communal banks existed and Chavez has attempted to strengthen these institutions. At communal banks, for example, people can borrow at low interest rates and they are under community control (see following story).

We visited some community group initiatives in Caracas. We saw an old cinema that a community has converted into a community centre where they hold regular cultural events. One of its cultural programmes is to get people thinking about indigenous history and African culture - the heritage of the slave trade. This is an attempt to challenge the dominance of Western models of history and culture.

Chavez has set up parallel structures in health and education. Existing health facilities and hospitals are often located far from where ordinary people live. Now many neighbourhoods have free clinics staffed by Cuban doctors who are training Venezuelans. These doctors are very well liked. About 120 new clinics have been set up.



Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela

London's transport system and Chavez has brought him in to consult on Venezuela's transport infrastructure.

Chavez is open to experimentation and to redefining the meaning of 20th century socialism. At present he is using state power to organise the country but there are critics who believe he is neglecting the emergence of organisation from below. He is attempting to permit these things to happen simultaneously.

The challenge is now to organise PSUV throughout the country. This is Chavez's Achilles heel, his weakness,

he believes this will provide the US with an excuse to intervene in Venezuela.

Chavez controls the state media and probably about two-thirds of the population support his perspective. These are the people who elected him into office, the poor and sections of the middle class. He addresses the nation every Sunday and answers questions people ask him.

But the right-wing also actively run their own media which constantly tries to undermine Chavez' initiatives. This twin tracked media is a problem for Chavez.



Herbert Jauch

Members of community council. Mao is speaking.

Some medical facilities attached to clinics are very good. I saw gyms, for example, which specialise in muscular and arthritic conditions. These facilities have been created with money obtained from oil revenue. These oil reserves were already nationalised but through corruption the profits went to the ruling class. Now petro-dollars are being used to develop facilities for the poor.

In the clinics we met a number of middle class student volunteers who pointed out that hospitals have been neglected in order to build clinics. But Chavez sees clinics as the health priority at the moment so this is where major health resources are being directed.

Tell us more about Chavez?

He was very approachable the night he came to talk to us at our meeting. We were allowed to ask him any questions we wanted, including critical questions. He's very open, humourous, creative and undefensive. He admits he's learning. A weakness which he also admits is that he's too emotional and sometimes too quick to criticise, such as the communist party.

He laughingly told delegates how former President Bush is actually a socialist because in the current economic crisis he has been forced to nationalise US banks. Thereafter whenever he referred to Bush he called him 'Comrade Bush'.

His creativity is shown in the transport arena. Most of the poor, for example, live on mountain sides overlooking the main section of Caracas city. They live far from work and shopping centres and there are no roads up these mountains which are hugely crowded and people had to walk long distances. Chavez adopted the idea of a cable car which is being constructed and will soon run regularly from these poor communities to the city centre.

He is critical of Soviet socialism which was based on the cult of the personality and he also rejects the architectural ugliness of this kind of socialism. Yet some have accused Chavez himself of playing into the cult of the personality especially as he is making himself available to run for a third term as president where the constitution stipulates a two term presidency.

The constitution allows for referendums and in a referendum last year on extending his

presidency, he lost. Supporters argue that he lost because the referendum included a whole package of other issues so it was difficult to know what people were voting against. He intends holding a further referendum which will address the issue of a third term presidency alone. [In February this year the Venezuelans voted in a referendum for a no term limit.]

He is adamant that he is not interested in a life time presidency but rather that he wants to extend his term in order to deal with unfinished business. He is aware of the problem of what will happen when he goes, and if a successor will drive a pro-poor agenda in the way he has. He is attempting to extend his term but only within proper democratic procedures.

Chavez has a good relationship with the leadership of other Latin American countries although he is probably closest to the leaders of Bolivia and Ecuador and countries of Central America. They are all in conversation and work together despite differences. LB

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