

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/03/06/preparing-for-a-post-chavez-venezuela/>

Preparing for a Post-Chávez Venezuela

Not One Step Backward, Ni Un Paso Atrás

by GEORGE CICCARIELLO-MAHER
March 06, 2013

Hugo Chávez is no more, and yet the symbolic importance of the Venezuelan President that exceeded his physical persona in life, providing a condensation point around which popular struggles coalesced, will inevitably continue to function long after his death. It's not for nothing that the words of the great revolutionary folk singer Alí Primera are on the tip of many tongues:

Los que mueren por la vida

no pueden llamarse muertos

—

Those who die for life

cannot be called dead.

A Barefoot Revolutionary

Hugo Chávez was a poor kid from the country, which tells you much of what you need to know about him. Bare feet, mud hut, perpetual sunburn, gleaning hard lessons and a strong dose of

audacity from everyday experiences in that wild part of the Venezuelan flatlands, or *llanos*, that crash abruptly into the towering Andes mountains.

While politics was in the soil under his feet and in his every social interaction, Chávez's first formal contact with revolutionary politics came through his elder brother, Adán, a member of the still-clandestine former guerrilla organization, Party of the Venezuelan Revolution (PRV). It was the PRV that refused intransigently to come down from the mountains in the late 1960s when the Venezuelan Communist Party decided to withdraw from the armed struggle, and it was the PRV more than any other organization that resisted Marxist orthodoxy by excavating Venezuelan and Latin American revolutionary traditions under the umbrella of "Bolivarianism."

Through Adán, Chávez the younger was imbued with the legacy of this Venezuelan guerrilla struggle and its aspirations, a necessary and portentous counterbalance to the official doctrine he would learn in the military academy. But even as a soldier, Chávez was always irreverent to the core, and it wasn't long before he had begun to organize with other radical officers. Their conspiratorial grouping would eventually be called the MBR-200, the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement, and it was not a purely military affair, evolving in close contact with revolutionary communist guerrillas from the PRV and elsewhere.

The Old Venezuela

The old Venezuela is no more. The Venezuelan *ancien regime* was one of self-professed harmony, and it cultivated this myth to the very end. For political scientists, this translated as "Venezuelan exceptionalism": in a sea of unrest and dictatorship, it alone remained relatively stable and "democratic." But this was a harmony premised on the invisibility of the majority, and a stability crafted through the incorporation and neutralization of any and all oppositional movements. Those who refused to concede were murdered or imprisoned in the gulags of this "exceptional" democracy.

When Hugo Chávez first attempted to overthrow the Venezuelan government of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992, he was attacking a democracy in name only. Decades of two-party rule had created a system that was utterly unresponsive to the needs of the vast majority, and as economic crisis set in during the "lost decade" of the 1980s, the poor turned to rebellion and the government to brute repression. In only the most spectacular of many moments of resistance, the week-long 1989 rebellion known as the Caracazo, somewhere between 300 and 3,000 were slaughtered as Pérez ordered the military to "restore order" in the poor *barrios* that surround Caracas and other Venezuelan cities.

It was this rebellion more than any other, and the repression it unleashed, that led, nay *forced*, Chávez and others to attempt a coup with the support of revolutionary grassroots movements, and it was this coup more than any other event that led to his eventual election in 1998. *Finally* someone had taken a stand, and when Chávez promised on national television that the conspirators had only failed "*por ahora*, for now," he was effectively promising, as did Fidel Castro nearly 40 years prior, that history would absolve him.

The New Venezuela

In many ways, it has. Under Chávez's watch, Venezuela has become more equal, the most egalitarian country in Latin America in fact, according to the Gini coefficient of income distribution. Poverty has been reduced significantly, and extreme poverty almost stamped out. Illiteracy has been eliminated and education is freely accessible, through the university level, to even the poorest Venezuelans. Health care is free and universal. Despite catastrophic language by the Venezuelan opposition and foreign press, the economy is strong, and has weathered the global economic crisis better than most (notably, the United States).

More important than this improvement in the social welfare of the Venezuelan majority, however, are the *political* transformations that the Venezuelan state and people have undergone, transformations that remain far from complete. This was not a merely populist government that sought to buy votes through handouts, but a radically democratic government that sought, often despite its own autocratic tendencies, to empower the people to intervene from below as the true "protagonists" of history. Through communal councils, cooperatives, communes, and popular militias, the Venezuelan government has radically empowered the radical grassroots, albeit not without resistance from its own bureaucrats.

But these accomplishments do not belong to Chávez alone, and in fact, they do not belong to Chávez at all. Long before Chávez, there were the revolutionary movements that tried, failed, and tried better, generating the experiences, organizations, and outlooks that would eventually propel Chávez to the helm of an untrustworthy state. Any celebration of Chávez that presents him as a savior is an insult to the people he held in such high esteem, and whose orders he followed.

Inversely, some ill-informed leftists decry him as not having been revolutionary enough, not moving quickly enough toward socialism: the revolution must be all at once or not at all. Others, here taking a page from the liberals, attack him for being authoritarian, autocratic, and undemocratic. But this all misses the most fundamental point: that the Venezuelan revolution is not Chávez. If we fail to understand why many millions of Venezuelans are in mourning today, then we have voluntarily abandoned any serious effort to understand what is going on in Venezuela.

A Combative Democrat

Even as President, Chávez's rural persona always managed to break through the polite veneer of political leadership: as when he would often spontaneously break into *llanero* song, speak in country parables and *refranes*, or brutally attack opponents and allies alike on live television. Also arguably a legacy of the countryside was his paradoxical democratic authoritarianism: deeply respectful of the people and fervently egalitarian, he would not take no for an answer when it came to revolutionizing the country. While Chávez had long dreamed of becoming a major league pitcher, his childhood nickname, *latigo*, the whip, described his approach to politics at least as well as it described his fastball.

But this contradiction was not his own: direct democracy and representative democracy are rarely the sympathetic allies their names might suggest, and one of the seeming paradoxes of the

Bolivarian Revolution is that it has taken a firm push *from above* to clear the way for radically democratic participation *from below*. This is what critics of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution mean when they suggest that he has run roughshod over democratic “checks and balances,” failing to note that such institutional constraints, however justifiable, are often far from democratic.

As a result, the two sides seem to speak completely different languages: for the one, which seems to include Republican Congressman Ed Royce bid a quick “good riddance” to Chávez, the leader was an authoritarian dictator. Such claims come as a surprise to Chavistas, however, who have elected him many times, repeatedly choosing the path of an increasingly radical revolutionary process, and who are quick to point out the contradiction between their democratic will and term limits. Many poor Venezuelans, too, were surprised at the outrage that ensued when Chávez referred to George W. Bush as “the devil” or as a “donkey.” The poor rarely grasp the role of politeness in politics, seeing it instead intuitively but correctly as the realm of powerful oppositions, of Bush’s own “you’re with us or you’re against us.”

The Manichean nature of Venezuelan politics in recent years has been undeniable, but we would be well advised to recognize, with Frantz Fanon, that this division between us and them, Chavistas and *escualidos* (or more recently, *majunches*), was more a reflection of a structural reality than the fault of Chávez or the Revolution. While elite Venezuelans began to mourn the disappearance of Venezuelan “harmony,” what they really meant was that, all of a sudden, poor and dark-skinned Venezuelans had appeared, had made their presence felt, and had even assumed the mantle of the government as a mechanism for pressing their demands.

Chávez certainly courted Manicheanism to mobilize the people in the struggle, but this Manicheanism also came to him, for phenotypic as well as political reasons: dark-skinned, with a wide nose and large ears, “*with his very image*, Chávez has shaken up the beehive of social harmony... *His image* upsets the wealthy women of Cuaremare.” Chávez and his supporters have long been racialized in terms that would seem scandalous anywhere else: monkey, blackie, scum, horde, rabble. Open racism exploded during the 2002 coup that unseated Chávez for less than two days, in many ways forcing him to recognize it publicly in a country that had often celebrated *mestizaje* and insisted that there was no racism in Venezuela. In the end, this Manicheanism has become the most important motor for driving the revolutionary process forward, unifying the people against a common enemy and preparing them for the struggle ahead.

I was supposed to meet Hugo Chávez, but he cancelled at the last minute. His unpredictability stemmed from a combination of security concerns and an irrepressible desire to do everything himself. The closest I ever got was about 10 feet away, awash in a rushing torrent of red-shirted Chavistas on the Avenida Bolívar in 2007, as the now late President drove by atop a truck. As he passed, I reached up and performed my favorite Chavista gesture: pounding palm with fist to symbolize the brutal pummeling of the opposition. As though confirming the centrality of combat in a Revolution that would outlive him, he looked at me and did the same.

The Revolution Will Not Be Reversed

What will happen next? Within 30 days, there will be elections, in which Chávez's hand-picked successor Nicolás Maduro will almost certainly prevail against an opposition that only seems to ever come together for the purposes of then falling apart. But the future in the longer term remains unwritten. While nothing is inevitable, however, a great many poor and radicalized Venezuelans will tell you that they will not take *ni un paso atrás*, a single step back, and that conversely, *no volverán*, they shall not return. And they mean it.

This is a revolutionary assurance that has never depended solely on the figure of Chávez. As I write in the introduction to my forthcoming book *We Created Chávez*:

“The Bolivarian Revolution is not about Hugo Chávez. He is not the center, not the driving force, not the individual revolutionary genius on whom the process as a whole relies or in whom it finds a quasi-divine inspiration. To paraphrase the great Trinidadian theorist and historian C.L.R. James: Chávez, like the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, ‘did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made’ Chávez. Or, as a Venezuelan organizer told me, ‘Chavez didn’t create the movements, we created him.’”

In 1959, Frantz Fanon declared the Algerian Revolution irreversible, despite the fact that the country would not gain formal independence for another three years. Studying closely the transformation of Algerian culture during the course of the struggle and the creation of what he called a “new humanity,” Fanon was certain that a point of no return had been reached, writing that:

“An army can at any time reconquer the ground lost, but how can the inferiority complex, the fear and the despair of the past be reimplemented in the consciousness of the people?”

In revolution, there are no guarantees, and there's no saying that the historical dialectic cannot be bent back upon itself, beaten and bloody. The point is simply that for the forces of reaction to do so will be no easy task. Long ago, the Venezuelan people stood up, and it is difficult if not impossible to tell a people on their feet to get back down on their knees.