

Lessons From the 1811 Independence of Venezuela

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July 5 marked the 206th anniversary of Venezuela's independence. For any country the commemoration of such an event is of great historical importance and pride. The term "independence" has occupied centre stage in the last 18 years, during the Bolivarian Revolution. Former President Hugo Chávez and current President Nicolás Maduro have made independence and sovereignty the pillars on which Socialism of the 21st Century of the Bolivarian Revolution rests.

But can we draw parallels between Venezuelan independence of 1811 that gave birth to the First Republic, and the Venezuelan independence of today's Fifth Republic? Are there lessons to be learned? More than we think.

The attempts of independence in Venezuela go back to the first armed rebellion in 1795 – exactly one hundred years before the death in combat of José Martí in another independence movement in Cuba.

Francisco de Miranda, considered a precursor of Venezuelan independence, tried twice to reach the Venezuelan territory with an armed expedition from Haiti in 1806. Those incursions ended in failures, due to the negative influence of the clergy that was in favour of the Spanish colonial power, and the indifference of the population that was not ready for freedom.

Miranda proposed total independence from Spain. However by 1808, the Venezuelan oligarchy was divided. Some wanted a certain degree of autonomy that allowed them more political control, but within the Spanish empire, while others were supporters of full independence. Neither group prevailed.

The origins of the movement that culminated in the 1811 declaration of independence and started the First Republic rest on the events of April 19, 1810.

On that date a local governing board (*Junta Suprema*) was established formally in Caracas. This was a transitional government, not independent but still in favour of the Spanish Crown. However, this board carried out internal reforms; abolished the slave trade, tried to unify the provinces and strengthen its autonomy, and made efforts abroad to obtain the solidarity of other colonies and the recognition and help of foreign nations.

The character of this government did not allow it to go beyond the autonomy that had been proclaimed on April 19. For this reason, the governing board resolved to convene elections and set up a General Congress, before which it would decline its powers and decide the

future fate of the Venezuelan provinces. The call for elections ensured the transformation of the *de facto* government into an independent constitutional government. This early example of entrusting power to a constituent assembly is what gives this date, April 19, 1810, a prominent place in the Venezuelan coat of arms.

Following the elections, the first session of the newly created Venezuelan Congress took place on March 2, 1811. On July 3, lively debates started among the deputies around the issue of full independence. Among those in favour was Simón Bolívar who pronounced the famous question: “Three hundred years of calm, is it not enough?” in reference to the Spanish domination. On July 5, with independence being approved with forty votes in favour, representing seven of the ten provinces, the President of the Congress announced that it was “Solemnly Declared Venezuela’s Absolute Independence”. The Declaration is the first case of a Spanish colony of America declaring its absolute independence.



1876 study by [Martín Tovar y Tovar](#) depicting the signing of the declaration. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

This leadership role of Venezuela and its independence movement in 1811 is evocative of today’s movement for the creation of the Patria Grande (Great Homeland) of Latin America initiated by Simón Bolívar and resumed by Hugo Chávez.

The Act of Independence established a new nation, the United States of Venezuela, based on republican and federal principles, forever abolishing the Monarchy under the values of the equality of individuals, the prohibition of censorship, and freedom of expression. It enshrined the constitutional principle and was radically opposed to the political, cultural and social practices that had existed for 300 years in Spanish America. These values coincide with those that the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela espouses today.

A paragraph from the Venezuelan Act of Independence reveals the reasons given by the deputies for the need to cut ties with Spain:

“Notwithstanding our protests, our moderation, generosity, and the inviolability of our principles, contrary to the wishes of our brethren in Europe, we were

declared in a state of rebellion; we were blockaded; war was declared against us; agents were sent amongst us, to excite us one against the other, endeavoring to take away our credit with the other Nations of Europe, by imploring their assistance to oppress us.” [1]

Simply by adding the U.S. and some OAS countries to Europe, this statement might well have been written by the Maduro government in response to current threats to the Bolivarian Revolution. The similarity of aggression tactics over 200 years apart is striking, including the reference to foreign intervention.

The First Republic of Venezuela only lasted one year, giving lessons for the Fifth Republic. Bolívar himself analyzed the causes of the fall in his Manifiesto de Cartagena document in 1812.[2]

Popular hostility. This was a hostile resistance to the independence movement by people who preferred to remain a Spanish colony. This lack of internal solidarity gave strength to the colonialist powers to bring down the First Republic. Today we see a similar hostile resistance by rightwing groups in Venezuela and the effort that Chavismo is exerting to strengthen internal solidarity.

Economic crisis. The crisis was triggered by the loss of international trade, the flight of capital and the rising cost of staples, which resulted in a negative popular reaction against the authorities. This was not because independence was a “failed” system, just as today Chavismo is not a failed system. The crisis is manufactured in order to create unrest among the population.

Mistrust between military power and oligarchy. When Generalissimo Francisco de Miranda was given powers to support independence in 1811, the oligarchy was afraid of a military dictatorship, so Congress did not support executive measures. This has been a recurrent situation in Latin America. Today Chavismo has brought trust and a strong civilian-military alliance that the Venezuelan opposition is intent in breaking in order to achieve a regime change.

Tolerance system. The idea that reactionary movements could be carried out without bloodshed was widespread among many supporters of independence. However, the lack of a firm hand was also seen as a weakness leading to the loss of the first republic. Bolivar, for one, said:

“Under cover of this pious doctrine, to each conspiracy happened a pardon, and to each pardon happened another conspiracy that was forgiven again”.

This final cause of the fall of the First Republic raises an interesting question with respect to the restraint shown by the Maduro administration vis-à-vis the high level of violence from the rightwing opposition.

It would take 187 more years until 1999 before Hugo Chávez resumed the building of true Venezuelan independence, on the foundations of that First Republic, learning from those historical lessons. Not only did Chávez restore the true meaning of independence, but he broadened it to encompass sovereignty and popular government or democracy.

Chávez achieved the true self-determination of Venezuela, and extended it to all of Latin

America. To do this, he clearly understood that it was necessary to consolidate the internal unity of the country and the continent. Internally, he created a united party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), gathering the scattered political forces; in foreign policy, he created ALBA as the core alliance for the Patria Grande.

The 1810-1811 independence movement remains alive with the government of Nicolás Maduro. Today we see the possibility of further consolidation of the Bolivarian dream with the process to elect the individuals and sectoral members of the National Constituent Assembly that will reexamine the Venezuelan constitution. [3] This is necessary as the only peaceful, legitimate, constitutional and democratic process for all Venezuelans to participate in without exclusion, to achieve the Venezuela they want.

Nino Pagliccia has two Master's Degrees from Stanford University and is a retired researcher on Canada-Cuba collaborative projects at the University of British Columbia. He has published many peer-reviewed journal articles and has contributed chapters to books on topics about Cuba, the Cuban healthcare system and solidarity. He has been a long-time activist and has organized groups to do voluntary work in Cuba for almost 15 years.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.declarationproject.org/?p=370>

[2] <http://www.psuve.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/ManifiestodeCartagena.pdf>

[3] <http://www.cubadebate.cu/especiales/2017/05/29/por-que-se-convoca-una-asamblea-constituyente-en-venezuela/#.WWm2KTOZMdV>

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