

The Spirit of Democracy in Venezuela

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, December 08, 2006

8 December 2006

"Today we gave another lesson in dignity to the imperialists, it is another defeat for the empire of Mr. Danger....another defeat for the devil. We will never be a colony of the US again....Long live the socialist revolution....Destiny has been written....Socialism is human. Socialism is love."

This is how Hugo Chavez Frias characterized his smashing electoral victory on December 3 when he appeared on the balcony of the Palacio de Miraflores (the official presidential palace residence) and addressed a huge gathering of his followers below that evening telling them of his victory for the people and that he now has an even stronger mandate to pursue his Bolivarian Project to do more for them ahead than he's already accomplished so far which is considerable.

He told his loyal, cheering supporters his impressive landslide electoral victory is one more blow to George Bush, and it follows on the others won by populist candidates in the region in the past six weeks by Ignacio Lula da Silva in Brazil on October 29, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua on November 7, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador on November 26. Chavez will serve for another six year term that will run until December, 2012.

Earlier in the day, Hugo Chavez showed he's indeed a man of the people by casting his own vote the same way ordinary people do. Unlike George Bush who goes everywhere in an entourage of limousine, helicopter, or Air Force One luxury accompanied by a phalanx of security needed to protect him from the people he was elected to serve, Chavez drove himself in his aging red-colored Volkswagon to his assigned polling station accompanied by his young grandson in the back seat, voted, and then left the same unaccompanied way he came. That's how a man of the people does it - no bells, whistles or extravagant trappings of power that's a hallmark of how things are done to excess in the US calling itself a model democracy but one only for the few with wealth and power and that behaves like a rogue state that's only a model for despots and tyrants.

In Venezuela under Hugo Chavez there's real participatory democracy for all the people. After it played out in a fair and open electoral process, Chavez greeted his supporters in an atmosphere of jubilant celebration once National Electoral Council (CNE) president Lucena Tibisay announced at 10:30 PM election night that with about 78% of the vote tallied, Chavez received 61.4% (5,936,000 votes) to right wing opposition candidate Manuel Rosales 38% (3,715,000 votes).

The early figures were then updated showing Chavez increased his advantage to 62.89% (7,161,637 votes), handily defeating Rosales by about 26 points (at about 37%) - an impressive nearly two to one thrashing. It was also announced that voter turnout was about 75% or the highest percentage in Venezuela's history making this election an historic event

and a clear mandate for Hugo Chavez.

Once the first results were announced on election night, it was clear to Mr. Rosales he'd lost and he was forced to concede defeat. He added, however, he would continue opposing the policies of the Chavez government "struggling for the people of Venezuela (and announcing) we are beginning the struggle for the construction of a new time for Venezuela....and I won't stop there, from today on I will be in the streets (staying) in the struggle, in the fight." He didn't say what he has in mind is returning the country to its ugly past serving the interests of wealth and power and ignoring the needs of ordinary people, all his pious rhetoric aside. He's sure to get lots of encouragement and help from Washington as its unbending agenda going forward is to do precisely that. Short of an armed invasion, however, it may be harder than ever to do that as Hugo Chavez came out ahead in all 23 of Venezuela's states including in Rosales' home state of Zulia that went for Chavez with a 50.57% majority, an embarrassment he also neglected to mention in his concession statement cum bravado. A dozen other candidates participated in the election as well, but had nothing to brag about, getting in total less than half of one percent of the vote total.

From the US capitol, State Department spokeswoman Janelle Hironimus added her government's response without a touch of irony from an administration that's already tried and failed three times to oust Hugo Chavez: The US government recognizes the right of the Venezuelan people "to elect the government of their choice and the path they want for their country." US Undersecretary of State for Latin America Thomas Shannon added: "We do not want a relationship of confrontation (with Venezuela). We've always looked for ways to deepen the dialogue with....President Chavez (and we hope) he will show a greater interest."

Neither US official tried explaining that their post-election good faith rhetoric is belied by their government's actions since the Bush administration came to power in 2001 trying every underhanded trick it could cook up to undermine and oust Hugo Chavez and is still engaging in subversion. It would be quite a change in the Bush White House if it ever practiced what it always disingenuously preaches fooling no one, especially Hugo Chavez and his government.

The same kind of post-election forked tongue comments came from US Ambassador William Brownfield who congratulated Venezuelans on a smooth and peaceful election and indicated Washington's willingness to have a less confrontational relationship with Chavez saying: "We recognize that and we're ready, willing and eager to explore and see if we can make progress on bilateral issues." Hugo Chavez understands full well the kind of relationship the ambassador means and responded to the overture: "They want dialogue but on the condition that you accept their positions. If the government of the United States wants dialogue, Venezuela will always have its door open. But I doubt the US government is sincere....we are a free country. We were once a North American colony, and we will not be one ever again."

Chavez was being polite but firm as he knows the US is never sincere in its dealings with other countries and is determined to remove him from office. Also, its relations with all Global South countries are uncompromisingly ones on an "our way or the highway" basis. For Hugo Chavez, that's no way, and it's hard to imagine relations between the two countries will change going forward, at least under a Bush administration. Chavez explained further saying: "How are we going to have good relations with a government that has financed conspiratorial activities here?"

It's also a government establishing closer ties with the military in Latin American countries (circumventing ruling governments if necessary) to counter the influence and spread of populist leftist governments like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Former US Southern Command General Bantz Craddock explained the real sentiment of the Bush administration toward the region when he said: "The challenges facing Latin America and the Caribbean today are significant to our national security. We ignore them at our peril." He wasn't referring to the need to be more conciliatory to populist leftist leaders like those in Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador (in January) or Fidel Castro in Cuba (the US has tried and failed many dozens or even hundreds of times to kill) who have notions of governance much different than those in Washington.

For the moment at least, the cheering crowd outside the Miraflores on election night had other thoughts on their mind, but like their president demand nothing less than a relationship based on equality and respect with their dominant northern neighbor. They gathered in the late evening pouring rain dressed in their signature red T-shirts and caps, waving Venezuela flags and shouting "Uh, ah, Chavez no se va" - "Uh, ah, Chavez will not go." It continued all night in the celebratory streets of Caracas echoing Chavez's words repeating "Libertad (liberty) and telling the crowd this was a victory for them, for socialism and for the Bolivarian Revolution he now wants to advance to the next stage.

Venezuela Under Chavez - How Real Democratic Elections Are Run

The polls opened at 7AM on Sunday, December 3, but hours earlier people were already queueing up in their eagerness to participate in Venezuela's democratic electoral process. Most of them, as we know, were there to support Hugo Chavez Frias as their president and won't allow anyone else to have the job as long as he wants it. The lines were long at many of the stations, but observers noted voting across the country ran smoothly with only minor problems that were no obstacle to the electoral process. About 1400 observers were on hand to witness the day's events including 10 representatives from the Carter Center in the US, 130 from the European Union (EU), 60 from the Organization of American States (OAS) and 10 from the Mercosur Common Market of the South countries.

At day's end, OAS team leader Juan Enrique Fisher congratulated Venezuelan officials for a "transparent and well-run election....We congratulate the Venezuelan people for their spirit of citizenship, President Chavez for his popular mandate and candidate Rosales for his civic spirit and for fortifying democracy." He described the voting as "massive and peaceful" and added scattered reports of voting equipment malfunctions were minor and more attributable to voter unfamiliarity with the machines than to irregularities. Spanish parliamentarian Willy Meyer, one of seven members from the European Parliament, noted the process was smooth-running and turnout was "massive, well-arranged and happy..." European Union leader Antonio Garcia Velasquez said Venezuelan electoral officials gave them "complete liberty and with all requirements so that the job (of observing) can be fulfilled in conformity with our stipulations." The NGO Electoral Eye noted in an afternoon statement that 99% of the voting centers were operating "completely normally."

Voting took place using 33,000 ballot tables at 11,118 polling stations throughout the country, and each candidate in the election was allowed to have observers present at all of them if they wished. All registered Venezuelans, of course, could vote including the 57,667 eligible ones located in other countries. Voting took place on Sunday to make it as easy as possible for people to participate, and while polling stations were scheduled to close at 4PM Caracas time, most stayed open as long as there were people in line who hadn't yet voted.

Venezuela's Electoral Process Prior to the Election of Hugo Chavez

Before Hugo Chavez was first elected the country's president in December, 1998, less than half of all eligible Venezuelans were registered to vote and thus were unable to participate in choosing their elected officials who might help them raise their standard of living including the great majority of impoverished people in the country most in need of positive change. For decades previously, two parties in the country, Democratic Action (AD) and Social Christian Party (COPEI), dominated the political process through a power-sharing arrangement that served the interests of Venezuela's wealthy elite and its "sifrino" middle class ignoring the needs and rights of the great majority of poor and effectively disenfranchised. It finally boiled over in the streets in the late 1980s and 1990s that led to the governing coalition bringing Hugo Chavez to power in 1998 that changed everything - just the way Chavez promised he's do it if elected.

Along with his political and social revolution, Chavez promised to address the problem of electoral fraud and exclusion that had to be overcome for any true democracy to exist. At the outset of his first term in office, the National Assembly strengthened earlier reforms and initiated new ones focusing on voter access and rights, security and eliminating the kinds of fraudulent practices that characterized Venezuelan elections in the past.

A major and successful initiative was later established in 2003 known as Mision Identidad (Mission Identity) that aimed to implement Article 56 of the Bolivarian Constitution stating: "All persons have the right to be registered free of charge with the Civil Registry Office after birth, and to obtain public documents constituting evidence of the biological identity, in accordance with law." The Mission constituted a combined mass citizenship and voter registration drive that's given millions of ordinary Venezuelans national ID cards granting them the full rights of citizenship they never before had. It also resulted in over five million Venezuelans being able to register and vote in elections for the first time ever up to the middle of 2006 - including qualified immigrants and indigenous people who never before had any rights. In 2000, before this initiative was begun, 11 million Venezuelans were registered to vote. By September, 2006, the number had grown to over 16 million in a country of 27 million people.

How the Electoral Process Is Administered

The electoral process is administered by the National Electoral Council (CNE). It's an independent body, separate from the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches of government or any private corporate interests. It's comprised of 11 members of the National Assembly and 10 representatives of civil society, none of whom are appointed by the President.

Elections are now conducted in Venezuela using Smartmatic touchscreen electronic voting machines with verifiable paper ballot receipts that voters can check to assure they confirm the vote they cast and then are saved by the CNE to have as a permanent record of vote totals that can be used in case a recount is needed. They also require voters to leave an electronic thumbprint to assure no one votes more than once.

The machines work as intended leading the Carter Center to comment, based on their observations of their use: "The automated machines worked well and the voting results do reflect the will of the people." Further independent studies verified the same thing including ones carried out by vote-process experts at the University of California Berkeley, Johns

Hopkins, Stanford and elsewhere. Great care was taken in their design to eliminate any possibility of tampering. It involves using a special technology splitting the security codes into four parts that has been endorsed in numerous voting security reports because it makes the machines used in Venezuela the most advanced system in the world according to the European Union Election Observation Mission in the country.

How Elections Are Now Run in the US

Contrast this exercise of real participatory democracy with the way things are done in the US, especially since the fraud-laden election bringing the Bush administration to power. A growing number of investigations have since revealed how corrupted the electoral process has become, especially in national elections, where a systematic effort has been made to disenfranchise portions of those segments of eligible voters likely to oppose Republican candidates or selected Democrats representing elitist interests. Many techniques are used to do it starting with the privatization of the electoral process that gives large electronic voting machine companies total unregulated control over it.

In the 2004 national election, more than 80% of the US vote was cast and counted on these machines owned, programmed and operated by three large corporations, most of which have no verifiable paper ballot receipts making it impossible to have a recount as any done, if needed, will only verify the first result being challenged. The process now is secretive and unreliable run by private corporate interests with everything to gain if candidates they support win, and based on what's now known, that's exactly what's happened. As long as this system prevails, the US electoral process is fraudulent on its face making a sham of the notion of the kind of free, fair and open elections that are a hallmark of the way things are run under Hugo Chavez.

It's what one observer, commenting on US elections, calls the "ultimate crime" as the very bedrock of democracy depends on the right of the electorate to exercise its will at the polls without it being subverted by private or other interests. Its importance is what Tom Paine said about it at the nation's founding: "The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which all other rights are protected. To take away this right (as has happened in the US) is to reduce a man to slavery."

Subversion with electronic voting machine manipulation is only part of the problem as investigations have also uncovered much more revealing a systematic perversion of the democratic process. In the 2000 and 2004 national elections in the US, millions of votes cast were never counted that included "spoiled ballots," rejected absentee ballots and others lost or deliberately ignored in the count. In addition, there's been massive voter roll purging, for a variety of reasons, that added up to one common denominator - eligible voters disenfranchised were likely to vote for the "wrong" candidates so they were denied the right to vote at all. In Venezuela under Hugo Chavez today, every eligible voter can register and is encouraged to vote without fear their vote cast will disappear, go to another candidate or they will be purged from the voter roles. That's how a true democracy is supposed to work, and in Venezuela today it does. In the US it doesn't, and it shows in the results. It also shows in that half or more of eligible voters here never bother showing up on election day believing, with justification, their votes don't count.

Another major difference between the two countries is in Venezuela the people are informed well enough to understand what the candidates stand for, how their government serves them, and they're willing to actively engage to keep their hard-won democratic rights and

social benefits they won't give up without a fight. In contrast, in the US, the public is lulled into believing in an illusion of democracy and the rights of the people guaranteed under one that don't exist anymore, if they ever did. Because of their apathy, they're not in the streets like the people of Venezuela, their comrades in Mexico, who aren't as fortunate, or the anti-Bush/Olmert masses comprising up to half the population of Lebanon in the streets of Beirut demanding real democracy, justice and an end to Western domination. Instead, they're home or out shopping because they fail to understand unless they go there in large enough numbers for the rights they don't, in fact, have, they'll never get them.

Chavez's Goal to Build A Socialist Society in the 21st Century

Chavez first announced to the world his hope to build a socialist society in the 21st century in Venezuela at the January 30, 2005 Fifth World Social Forum. He wants a humanistic one based on solidarity, not the bureaucratic kind that doomed the Soviet Union and Eastern European states where governments were top - down with no participation of the people who ended up ill-served. Later on, Chavez elaborated saying "We have assumed the commitment to direct the Bolivarian Revolution towards socialism....a new socialism....a socialism of the 21st century....based in solidarity, fraternity, love, justice, liberty and equality" beyond the free-market model based on exploitation of working people for the interests of capital.

The Chavez government has pursued these goals incrementally since it came to power in February, 1999 following Hugo Chavez's election in December, 1998. He promised Venezuelans his vision of a Bolivarian Revolution to free them from what 19th century liberator Simon Bolivar called the imperial curse that always "plague(d) Latin America with misery in the name of liberty." His Movement for the Fifth Republic Party (MVR) got a peoples' mandate for change at its outset to draft a new constitution that transformed Venezuela from an oligarchy serving wealth and power alone to a model humanist democratic state serving everyone based on solidarity and the principles of political, economic and social justice.

He delivered in ways unimaginable in the US where essential government-delivered services for the people are denounced as radical and denied in a nation now dominated by a reactionary ideology and the notion that only neoliberal market-based solutions are acceptable - even though it's proved they don't work. Under this flawed model, government only works for the privileged few that benefit under its law-of-the-jungle rules that come at the expense of the great majority losing out the way it always happens in a top-down society run by and for them. This is the state of things today in the US, a nation where its founding principles have been turned upside down and is now run by and for plutocrats with values corrupted by false notions of fairness, equity and justice.

That was how Venezuela was governed before the age of Hugo Chavez. In the 28 years before he was first elected, the people suffered from deprivation, neglect and indifference. Venezuelan inflation-adjusted per capita income fell 35% in those years, the worst decline in the region and one of the worst in the world. Chavez halted the decline and turned it around as high oil prices and a favorable economic climate lifted the nation's growth to the highest level in the region following the crippling 2002-03 oil strike and destabilizing effects of the short-lived coup deposing Hugo Chavez for two days in April, 2002. Since that time, unemployment declined and the crushing poverty level in the country fell from a high of around 62% in 2003 to a level near 40% today and falling.

Chavez, however, went much further by enshrining the principles of a participatory democracy and its social revolution in the new 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. It mandates revolutionary structural changes for political, economic and social justice that include quality health care for all as a “fundamental social right and....responsibility....of the state.” It bans discrimination, guarantees free expression Chavez’s fiercest critics enjoy and use to the fullest against him without recrimination, provides for housing assistance, an improved social security pension system for seniors, assures support for the rights of indigenous people, and requires quality education be made available for all to the highest level that virtually eliminated illiteracy – compared to the stated 20% level here in the US according to the Department of Education figures but which, in fact, is much higher and increasing based on the best evidence of functional illiteracy among the secondary student populations of the nation’s inner cities.

That would now be unacceptable in Venezuela where Chavez post-election wants to take his Revolution to the next level doing more than ever for his people. Along with all of the above, the government additionally already provides subsidized food for those in need, land reform, job training and micro-credit. It’s a country in which most of the productive capacity is state or privately owned, but a great emphasis has been made to be innovative and go in new directions, experimenting with the idea of co-management with state-owned enterprises allowed to be jointly managed by the workers in them. A major effort has also been made to expand the number of cooperatives outside of state or private control, and since Chavez was first elected the total number of them has grown from 800 to 100,000 employing 1.5 million people or 10% of the adult population and rising.

Another of Chavez’s top priorities since first taking office in 1999 has been land reform. The country has long been run by rich oligarchs including large land-owning ones that allowed 5% of the largest landowners to control 75% of the land and 75% of the smallest ones to have only 6% of it. Chavez is trying to implement land reform legislation allowing underused land owned by the latifundistas (the large rich landowners) to be redistributed to landless campesinos who’ll put it to productive use and improve their lives in the process.

Chavez also wants to continue enhancing all the above-listed programs that have improved the lives of his people including the many innovative social Missions using the country’s oil wealth to do it. His impressive electoral victory gives him a greater mandate than ever to advance his Bolivarian Project to the next level and his vision of socialism or social democracy in the 21st century. It won’t be a simple task as the power of the oligarchs supported by the Bush administration, and what may succeed it, are powerful obstacles in the way of social advance. So far he’s achieved wonders for the past eight years in the face of great odds, but much more needs to be done. With the power of the Venezuelan people standing with him, not willing to give up the great gains already gotten, Chavez is now looking ahead to advance the country’s social democracy well into the new century.

Hugo Chavez is now an empowered symbol and leader of a growing social revolutionary populist movement slowly spreading in the region that needs to be turned into an unstoppable juggernaut. It represents a hopeful and promising alternative to generations of entrenched elitism backed by military power along with oppressive US dominance and the poisonous effects of the neoliberal Washington Consensus model savagely exploiting the Global South for the interests of capital in the North. It’s a way to be free from the US-controlled IMF and World Bank debt-bondage demanding in return punishing fiscal austerity, state-owned industry privatizations, social neglect, the loss of organized labor rights in a system of market deregulation benefitting the privileged alone at the expense of staggering

levels of poverty, deprivation and inequality for the majority. It's a way to build a free society of, for and by the people un beholden to wealth and power. It's a way to reduce poverty and inequality and improve the lives of ordinary people in ways never thought possible in the developing world until Hugo Chavez had a vision and was able to implement it and begin its spread.

Chavez now has allies in Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, Nicaragua, Uruguay and even Chile that still exists under the shadow of Augusto Pinochet and his 17 year dictatorship that crushed the strongest democracy in the region and from whose rule the country has yet to fully recover, but hopefully has a chance under its new more enlightened leader. They represent what author Tariq Ali refers to in the region as an "Axis of Hope," and Chavez has now earned enough political capital to bring it closer to fruition.

The momentum in Latin America is with Hugo Chavez and his allies if they can seize it and take it to the next level. The chance for success has never been better with the US more vulnerable than ever and staggering from its loss of dominance in the Middle East and the forces arrayed against it there showing they can stand up to the most powerful nation on earth and prevail. It's a sign America is not all-powerful, is in decline politically and economically and choosing an independent course is an alternative that can work if enough nations unite and do it together.

The region's most dominant nations have already shown they can oppose Washington and prevail. Following Argentina's IMF-imposed structurally adjusted economic meltdown at the end of the 1990s, President Nestor Kirchner got the financial markets in 2005 to accept his take-it-or-leave-it offer of 30 cents on the dollar payment on the country's unrepayable sovereign debt of around \$130 billion and have to accept it in the form of long-term, low-interest bonds.

Then, events at the November, 2005 Summit of the Americas in Mar del Playa, Argentina sounded the death knell for the US-proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) expansion of the disastrous NAFTA model because the dominant Southern Common Market Mercosur countries in the region of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela want no part of it signaling for scholar Immanuel Wallerstein that "The Monroe Doctrine is dead. And there are few mourners."

And yet another blow to US-promoted globalization came with the collapse of the World Trade Organization (WTO) Doha (so-called "Development") Round talks in July, 2006 because more developing countries now realize the US/Western-one-way trade deals have been disastrous despite disingenuous rosy promises of economic growth and prosperity that only delivered increased poverty, deprivation and environmental destruction instead.

Before these agreements from hell were ever agreed to, average per capital income growth in Latin America was 82% from 1960 to 1980 (4% per person, per year). Once the notion of globalization took hold after 1980 based on the Washington Consensus neoliberal model, the rate of income growth in the region through 2000 fell to 9% (less than half of 1% per person, per year), and since 2000 it dropped to 5% - a stunning indictment of how so-called "free-trade" US-style (that isn't "fair trade") is a formula for economic ruin for those countries adopting it, and significant ones like Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and others in Latin America want no more of it.

It remains to be seen going forward if this kind of momentum can continue, gain strength

with new allies working together for the common self-interest of all to break free from the dominant US chokehold by asserting their independence as Venezuela under Hugo Chavez has shown can be done and be able to get away with it and benefit as a result.

Further success in Venezuela and elsewhere depends on breaking free from what South African born and now activist and distinguished Bolivarian Venezuelan Professor of philosophy and political science Franz Lee says must be accomplished ahead: "(Getting) rid of all the five tentacles of capitalist imperialism: exploitation, domination, discrimination, militarization and alienation....in a class struggle against global fascism." In Venezuela, the process has only just begun. Hugo Chavez has taken up the challenge to move it ahead, but he'll need the support of other enlightened leaders to boldly go with him where he's already gone and then take it a lot further to achieve a peoples' victory over the forces that have long held them down and denied them the equity and justice they deserve.

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