

VENEZUELA: “It’s My Party, and I’ll Cry If I Want to”: Chavez Moves Forward

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Was it my imagination or were there lots of sad faces at last night’s meeting at the Teresa Carrena theatre — the site of so many Bolivarian rallies and celebrations? Certainly, here was another occasion for celebration. It was a meeting to recognize the electoral triumph of Hugo Chavez on 3 December and, in particular, to acknowledge the contribution of campaign workers organized in the [Comando Miranda](#).

And, acknowledge they did: certificates were given to the state organizations which produced the greatest votes for Chavez’s re-election: Amacuro Delta (77.98%), Amazon (77.81%), Portuguesa (77.05%), Sucre (73.70%), and Cojedes (73.33%) — as well as to exemplary municipal battalions such as Rio Negro (96.4%). Definitely a time to celebrate.

So, why those glum faces? Well, it had to do with Chavez himself. Now, I’ve seen many Chavez speeches on the Channel 8, the state TV station. And, they’ve run the gamut — those electric occasions in which high velocity currents flow between the red-shirted Chavez and red-shirted supporters (especially women) lifting them higher and higher, the meetings where Ministers and prominent leaders smile and chuckle on cue and wish for just-a-little-mention, and the similar gatherings where businessmen-who-want-to-do-business-with-the-state listen to the blue-suited Chavez for hints about their future. But this was like none of those occasions.

Last night, there were cheers in the back half of the theatre and in “the gods” — but few in the high-priced seats. And, it had to do with Chavez’s message. Not the part about going toward socialism (although there would have been some who still shudder at the word but who have retained hopes at working on the modifying adjective). And, not the part about asking all his Ministers for their resignation (because that can be just a formality but also does open up the possibility of new appointments). And, not the attacks on corruption (which have been heard before). No, it was all about the new party, the “unique party.”

Many of those present have been looking forward to this idea — ever since Chavez announced earlier this year that 2007 would be a year to create this unified party. After all, the battles among the various Chavista parties have been growing more intense recently. (And, so have the struggles among the various factions of the MVR, the Movement for the 5th Republic, the electoral party that Chavez formed initially.) Accordingly, the idea of bringing unity to an often-dysfunctional team did have its appeal (and not the least to Chavez, who was well aware of problems in the MVR and the other parties).

Of course, the terms of unification were unclear, and the MVR domination of the Comando Miranda didn’t inspire confidence in the smaller Chavist parties. So, it wasn’t surprising,

after electoral results in which the prominently-placed MVR slot overwhelmingly captured the Chavez vote, that there were mutterings from that camp that the MVR *is* the party (and that all others should dissolve) or that the MVR initiated moves for the delisting of all parties which failed to receive 1% of the vote (which would remove all but 4 of the Chavista parties).

But, last night Chavez offered some surprises. The MVR is history, he said. The new party (provisionally called the United Socialist Party of Venezuela) will be there for all the parties to join or, alternatively, to separate themselves from the government. But this, he stressed, will not be a party that combines the existing parties. Rather, it will be a party that can only be built from the base. In your communities, in your patrols, battalions, squadrons, identify your neighbours who are supporters of the Revolution — you know who they are, he proposed. Do a census, build the party from below. Make it a party that is not built for electoral purposes (although able to engage in electoral battles); make it a party that can fight the Battle of Ideas, one that can fight for the socialist project, one that allows us to read and discuss the way forward. Make this party the most democratic in the history of Venezuela.

And, choose your true leaders, which only the base can do. There's been too much anointing of people from above with a pointing finger (especially mine). Choose the people you have faith in, whom you know — not the thieves, the corrupt, the irresponsible, the drunkards. The bad boys must be kept outside. We need to stress socialist morals, socialist ethics.

All this was bad news enough for the politicians accustomed to the practices of the 4th Republic and those who had adopted them to succeed. But, the real dagger came with a message which summed it all up succinctly: *"The new party cannot be the sum of old faces. That would be a deceit."*

And Chavez said to those representatives of the old parties: we don't have the time for endless debates about this. We have to build this new party from below now. So, you decide what you are going to do because there's no time to lose.

Small wonder that there were glum faces at this celebration. The battle for a new party of the revolution and to build socialism is underway.

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