

VENEZUELA AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

Christopher Columbus made his first landfall on the South American continent in 1498 in what today is the country of Venezuela. Five hundred years later, the people who greeted him are thriving and enjoying new rights and prestige under Hugo Chavez's Revolutionary Bolivarian government. Looking at recent political changes in Venezuela from the point of view of its original inhabitants helps reveal the nature of Chavez's government, as well as highlighting why the elite see him as such a threat to their previously hegemonic control over the country.

History

Located on the northeastern part of the South American continent, Venezuela's Indigenous peoples never created the large empires that typified the high Andes on the continent's western region or in the central valley of Mexico. There, population pressure on scarce resources forced the development of state structures, culminating in the Quechua and Nahua peoples forming the Inka and Aztec empires. Such hierarchical and centralized state structures are inherently unstable, and Spanish conquistadores toppled them relatively easily.

In Venezuela, on the other hand, rich resources allowed a disperse population to thrive based on hunting, gathering, and agricultural production. Without a tradition of social stratification leading to an easily exploitable subjugated population accustomed to providing labor and tribute to an elite class, the Spanish made slower progress in colonizing the region than they did in Mexico or the Andes. Instead, the Europeans turned to Catholic missions to "civilize" the aboriginal population and began to import slave labor from Africa to work

on their plantations. Indigenous leaders such as Guaicaipuro led the resistance to European encroachments onto their lands, while western penetration pushed them further to the margins.

Indigenous Peoples

Today, Venezuela has a small but diverse Indigenous population that mostly lives far from the capital city of Caracas on the country's border regions with Guyana, Brazil, and Colombia. Numbering only about 1.5 percent of Venezuela's 23 million people, they are divided into about 28 different ethnic groups. The largest group, with about 200,000, are the Wayúu (also known as the Guajira) who live in the state of Zulia on the Colombia border. Smaller groups live in the southern and eastern states of Amazonas, Bolívar, Delta Amacuro, Anzoátegui, and Apure. In addition to the Wayúu, these groups include the Warao, Pemón, Añú, Yanomani, Jivi, Piaroa, Kariña, Pumé, Yekuana, Yukpa, Eñepá, Kurripakao, Barí, Piapoko, Baré, Baniva, Puinave, Yeral, Jodi, Kariná, Warekena, Yarabana, Sapé, Wanai, and Uruak.

In 1989, these diverse peoples formed the Venezuelan National Indian Council (Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela, CONIVE). President Nicia Maldonado, a Yekuana, notes that the organization was born as a popular struggle in the context of the *Caracazo* riots in 1989 against the government's neoliberal reforms: IMF-mandated oil price hikes that caused a popular uprising that left dozens dead. Out of a small office in Caracas, their elected staff press their concerns on both the national and international levels. Maldonado notes that their gains have not been easy, and that they've been achieved due to years of community struggles.

Constitutional Reforms

Since Venezuela gained independence from Spain in 1821, Indigenous and African peoples had always been held in a subjugated position, including being left out of the country's constitutions. After years of organizing social movements at the grassroots level, Indigenous peoples gained a significant political victory with the codification of many of their rights in the 1999 constitution. It expressed an inclusive Bolivarian thought that, in the words of an Indigenous delegate to the constitutional assembly, incorporated Indigenous and African peoples "from the preamble to the final transitional articles."

Article 9 of this new constitution declares that while Spanish is Venezuela's official language, "Indigenous languages are also for official use for Indigenous peoples and must be respected throughout the Republic's territory for being part of the nation's and humanity's patrimonial culture." Chapter VIII details the rights and responsibilities of Indigenous peoples. In particular, Article 119 recognizes the social, political, and economic organization of Indigenous communities, as well as their cultures, languages, rights, and lands. Specifically, land rights are collective, inalienable, and non-transferable. This is a critical provision, given that historically Indigenous peoples throughout Latin America have lost much of their territorial base through confiscation for the non-payment of debts, many of which were often illegally imposed by surrounding white landholders. On October 12, 2003, the government announced a new ambitious national campaign to provide legal titles for traditional Indigenous land holdings.

Subsequent articles pledge that the government will not engage in extraction of natural resources from native lands without consultation with Indigenous groups nor in a manner that would harm their cultures or economy. Furthermore, the local Indigenous population must benefit from this extraction. This is significant because governments have long exploited Indigenous lands for their wealth (hydro-electric power in Chiapas, oil in Ecuador, uranium in South Dakota, etc.) without consideration for the often disastrous impact it has on the local inhabitants. The constitution also defends the preservation of and respect for ethnic identities, traditional religions, and medicinal practices. Furthermore, it allows for the development of bilingual education programs that reflect Indigenous values and traditions. It defends Indigenous intellectual property rights, and abolishes 'bio-piracy' that extracts Indigenous resources and knowledge for foreign benefit with nothing being returned to local communities.

Article 125 proclaims an Indigenous right to political participation in the government, including representation in the National Assembly. Unlike what is often called the "dead letter of the law" in which positive-sounding legislation brings no real benefits for the intended population, these constitutional revisions have significantly improved the lives of Indigenous peoples in Venezuela. Most visibly, three Indigenous representatives (Noelí Pocatererra, José Luis González, and Guillermo Guevara, all long-time activists) were elected to the National Assembly and other leaders have assumed positions of authority in government. Never before has this previously marginalized population enjoyed such recognition and rights. The government's dedication to Indigenous rights is also reflected in its ongoing program to translate this constitution into all of Venezuela's languages.

Hugo Chavez

The child of provincial school teachers, Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez is an outsider to the elite white world of Caracas. Unlike previous leaders in Venezuela and throughout Latin America who gravitate toward the outside European world, Chavez is proud of his Indigenous and African roots, claiming that one of his grandmothers was a Pumé Indian. During his 1998 presidential campaign, he signed a "historic commitment" to govern on behalf of the country's half-million Indigenous peoples were he to be elected. It is a promise he has kept, and this has earned him the undying support of that sector of the population. He is their champion. At the same time, these policies have gained him the animosity of the traditional elite who bristle at the thought of an Indian or African Venezuela.

Chavez often returns to the themes of Indigenous rights in his talks and during his weekly live call-in program *Aló Presidente*, traveling to rural communities and inviting Indigenous peoples to join him on TV. Breaking from a centralized vision of the country, he proclaims his desire to govern on the behalf of all Venezuelans. He recently has proposed new programs to bring government benefits to previously forgotten regions and sectors of the country. These include an Indigenous bank that would bring micro financing to rural communities in a culturally sensitive and appropriate fashion, and an extension of the *Barrio Adentro* program that has brought medical services to marginalized urban neighborhoods to the countryside.

Coming out of a military background, Chavez has emphasized a civic-military alliance. For solidarity activists who are accustomed to protesting genocidal military regimes in Guatemala and Chile and the School of the Americas in the U.S., such an alliance appears unusual. This, however, ignores a subtext of socialist thought that has permeated

certain lower-class sectors of the military in many Latin American countries dating back to the 1930s. Rather than conceptualized as an elite tool of oppression, this counter discourse presents the military as a mechanism for bringing economic development to marginalized areas, even if it is in a centralized and hierarchical fashion. Furthermore, with a highly stratified class structure the military provides one of very few avenues for social advancement. Chavez himself embodies this process, rising to positions of power that otherwise would not have been available to him had he not been in the military. But rather than joining the elite, in the military barracks Chavez and others gained a political consciousness of the nature of economic exploitation and racial discrimination. This has fostered military-civilian and military-Indian alliances.

Venezuela today is witnessing many novel developments. Unlike in many other Latin American countries where Indigenous peoples have taken to the streets in protest of the government's neoliberal policies, in Venezuela they have taken to the street in defense of a government which for the first time is governing on their behalf. It has also fostered the convergence of popular movements, with the emergence of a strong alliance between peasants and Indians built around issues of class struggle and ethnic identity. Much can be revealed about the nature and intent of a social project by looking at it from a point of view of the most marginalized, and in Venezuela formerly oppressed peoples recognize in the Bolivarian experiment a path to their liberation.

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