



Fact Sheet: **MYTH AND REALITY ABOUT DEMOCRACY IN VENEZUELA**

Much media coverage about democracy in Venezuela presents a highly distorted picture of what is really occurring in the country. This fact sheet will clarify the myth that Venezuela is turning into a dictatorship. **The truth is that Venezuela is experiencing a thriving democracy, one that Venezuelans proudly call ‘participatory democracy’** as it centres on the active participation of all its citizens in all aspects of democratic life. In fact the renowned Chilean polling agency “Latinobarometro” found in 2008 that **Venezuela has the region’s highest rate of support for democracy as the best system of government, and the second highest rate of satisfaction with the actual functioning of democracy.**¹ This indicator has **increased by 14 percent since President Chavez took office in 1999.**² The following paper will show that democratic freedoms and citizens’ rights are strongly guaranteed by the Venezuelan state and have in fact expanded since the government of President Chavez was in power.

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President Nicolas Sarkozy

represent the interests of the diverse spectrum of Venezuelan society, all sectors of society participated in the drafting of the new document, including women’s organisations, professionals, indigenous peoples and members of various civil society groups.

Elections: Hugo Chavez Frías came to power through presidential elections in 1998. With 57 % he achieved the largest percentage of the popular vote in four decades. In 2004 he won a recall referendum with more than 59 % of the electoral vote and in 2006 he was reelected with nearly 63 % of the vote. “After 7 years in power President Chavez achieved what anywhere in the world would be considered a remarkable political victory: he obtained 1.7 million more votes than he did when first elected in 1998.”⁴

Since President Chavez took office in 1999, Venezuelans have voted in **28 regional and national elections and 6 referenda.** They have been to the ballot box 12 times since that date. Analysts conclude that **“Social progress [in Venezuela] has been accompanied by a dramatic expansion in democracy with more national electoral contests than virtually any other country in the world, and with respect for the outcomes ...”**⁵ As President Sarkozy noted about a referendum held in 2009 concerning the approval of constitutional amendments, it was, **“characterized by strong participation that demonstrates, yet again, the vitality of democracy in Venezuela.”**⁶ Election observers noted about this same event that, **“we would like to ... highlight the civic comportment of all of the citizenry on a day that was full of expectations and tensions, which speaks of the democratic mood of Venezuelan society.”**⁷

Political Rights and Freedoms

The participation of people in politics is stronger than ever in Venezuela. **According to “Latinobarometro”, Venezuela heads the list of South American countries with high political participation.**

Constitution of 1999: The 1999 Constitution builds the basis for Venezuela’s “participatory democracy”, “recognises the importance of economic, social and cultural rights in a democratic society; and establishes social justice as a constitutional mandate.”³ The Constitutional Assembly itself is an example of true participatory democracy: in order to accurately



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Electoral Reforms: With regard to the electoral process, the European Union noted that “...**the system developed in Venezuela is probably the most advanced system in the world to date.**” This is thanks to the reforms initiated and carried out by the Chavez government, aimed at securing voter transparency, preventing fraud and increasing voter participation. These reforms included the creation of an independent, non-partisan body to oversee elections (the National Electoral Council), the expansion of electronic voting to guarantee standardized machine voting and the increase in the number of voting centres from 8,271 in 1998 to 11,455 in 2008.⁸ New voting centres have been established predominantly in low income areas and rural communities, places where access to voting had traditionally been difficult. “Mission Identity” provided millions of Venezuelans with ID cards for the first time in their lives, so that they could exercise their rights as Venezuelan citizens, including their right to vote. In the elections of the year 2000, 11 million Venezuelans were registered to vote ... and at present it is 16.8 million in a country of 27 million people.⁹ Furthermore a new regulation introduced by the National Electoral Council in last November’s regional elections ensures gender equality in candidatures for positions as state legislative counsellors. **In 2008’s regional elections, 50 % of all available political positions went to women, while in 2004 this number was only 10 %.**¹⁰

Communal Councils are a key to the realization of participatory democracy in Venezuela. They are elected neighborhood-based assemblies with political and financial powers.¹¹ The Councils are made up of about 20 persons and are elected by around 200 to 400 families in a particular neighborhood. These grassroots institutions plan and execute development projects, according to need in their community. By March 2007 there were 19,500 Community Councils in Venezuela, which so far have carried out thousands of initiatives such as street paving, medical centres or sewage and water systems.¹²

“...the [electoral] system developed in Venezuela is probably the most advanced system in the world to date”
EU Election Observation Mission

Political Parties: Venezuela is the country with by far the largest number of political parties in Latin America, totalling 85 in 2008. In 2007 the parties supportive of President Chavez joined to form the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). According to the 2008 survey by Latinobarometro, Venezuelans are the second most likely in the region to agree that democracy cannot exist without political parties, and the third most likely to express trust in political parties and to agree that they are performing well.¹³

Civil Rights and Freedoms

Equality and Non-Discrimination: New legislation has been ratified to ensure the equal treatment of minorities and women in every aspect of society. In January 2007, the People’s Ministry for Indigenous Peoples was created and only one year later the State Ministry for Women’s Affairs (now the “Ministry of *Popular Power* for Women and Gender Equality”). Today, four out of the five branches of government are headed by women and Venezuela has South America’s narrowest gender-based wage gap and the third smallest in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁴

Freedom of the Press: Despite constant but unwarranted attacks by the international media about freedom of the press in Venezuela, the country’s media **do** enjoy the liberty to report, analyse and express opinions on all issues without government interference. In fact, **the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled on March 3rd 2009 that Venezuela does not violate “the right to find, receive and disseminate information”.**¹⁵

There are currently 876 TV and radio-stations operating in full compliance with the law in Venezuela and the overwhelming majority of them, which is to say about 65 %, is in private hands.¹⁶ “Most, in fact, express their opposition to the government vibrantly and stridently, and do so without any threats or retributive consequences. Even a cursory glance on the websites of the major newspapers and television stations shows the freedom with which journalists can



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express themselves. To date, no newspaper or television station or radio broadcaster has been shut down on the basis of its political views or opposition to President Chávez. Similarly, no journalists have been imprisoned or punished for doing their work. The Constitution of 1999 lists freedom of expression, the freedom of the press and freedom of information as fundamental liberties to be protected by the government. As Bart Jones, a longtime correspondent for the Associated Press wrote in an op-ed published in the *Los Angeles Times* on May 30, 2007, “Radio, TV and newspapers remain uncensored, unfettered and unthreatened by the government. Most Venezuelan media are still controlled by the old oligarchy and are staunchly anti-Chávez.”¹⁷

Social Rights and Freedoms

Democracy in Venezuela goes far beyond guaranteeing political and civil freedoms, as citizens can only effectively participate in democratic governance if their social rights, such as access to healthcare, education or work are secured. Much of this has been achieved through so called “Social Missions” and an innovative economic model.

Social Missions are state-sponsored grassroots-oriented development programmes, addressing pressing needs in various fields of human development such as education, health, culture, food security, job training and housing. Started in 2003 the missions have placed doctors, teachers, and social workers in thousands of poor Venezuelan communities, offering much-needed services free of charge. For example, Mission Barrio Adentro has placed 20,000 doctors in poor communities and Mission Robinson taught 1.6 million Venezuelans to read and write.¹⁸

The Economy is seen as a vehicle for creating an inclusive and egalitarian society based on the redistribution of wealth, the principles of solidarity, community participation and development from within. National oil revenues are channelled towards securing basic social rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the government supports the growth of

cooperatives to spur the national production of goods. The number of these has increased from 910 in 1999, to 148,020 in 2008¹⁹. In terms of economic growth, the Central Bank of Venezuela reported that the country’s GDP grew by 0.3% within the first quarter of 2009, bringing the number of consecutive quarters of economic growth to 22 in Venezuela. While the national economy, as any other in the world, has obviously been affected by the global economic downturn, being particularly apparent in the contraction of the Venezuelan oil sector, the non-oil sector grew by 1.3 % within this period. In fact, Latinobarometro concluded that Venezuelans have a comparatively high confidence in their economy. The expectation that economic conditions would improve within the next year was measured as the fourth highest in the region.²⁰

**“You can invent anything you want in order to criticize Chavez, but you can’t accuse him of suppressing democracy.”
President Lula da Silva**

Conclusion

Venezuela within the last ten years saw voting centres extended into poor areas, saw indigenous peoples and women becoming political protagonists, saw the number of medical centres and educational institutions in marginalized neighbourhoods increase, saw unemployment decrease from nearly 15 % to 7.9 %, saw extreme poverty fall from more than 20 to 9.5 percent, and much more.²¹ In fact, Venezuela has surpassed United Nations expectations in human development and had reduced poverty 50 percent by 2009, six years earlier than foreseen by the UN.²² These achievements are not a coincidence, but the result of much hard work by both the democratic government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and its citizens. Democracy is being taken seriously in Venezuela and the results speak for themselves. It is in this context that President Lula da Silva of Brazil said about the Chavez government that, ‘**You can invent anything you want in order to criticize Chavez, but you can’t accuse him of suppressing democracy**’²³.

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² “Democracy in Venezuela: The 2008 Latinobarometro Poll”, retrieved July 24, 2009, <<http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Democracy%20in%20Venezuela%20-%20Latinobarometro.htm>>

³ Alvarez, Bernardo, “Venezuela’s Global Agenda: Six More Years”, April 2007, <<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/2321>>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Venezuelanalysis.Com, “What Effect has 10 Years Hugo Chavez Had on Venezuela? A Debate”, Feb. 4, 2009, retrieved July 14, 2009, <<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4167>>

⁶ Venezuelanalysis, “French President Congratulates Chavez, praises Venezuelan Democracy”, Feb. 24, 2009, retrieved July 14, 2009 <<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/news/4245>>

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⁹ Venezuelanalysis, “The Media Response to Venezuelan Elections”, retrieved 9. July, 2009, <<http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/4005>>

¹⁰ Aporrea, “Se incrementa la presencia femenina para cargos de elección en Venezuela”, January 25, 2009, <<http://www.aporrea.org/poderpopular/n127658.html>>

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¹³ VIO, “Democracy in Venezuela: The 2008 Latinobarometro Poll” retrieved July 24, 2009, <<http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Democracy%20in%20Venezuela%20-%20Latinobarometro.htm>>

¹⁴ Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington D.C., “Ten of the Most Significant Human Rights Advances”, <<http://www.embavenez-us.org/factsheet/ddhhtop10english.pdf>>

¹⁵ “Interamerican Court of Human Rights Ruling on Freedom of Expression in Venezuela”, retrieved July 23, 2009, <<http://www.embavenez-us.org/factsheet/FS-CortelDH2.pdf>>

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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Social Justice In Venezuela”, retrieved July 24, 2009, <<http://www.embavenez-us.org/factsheet/socialjustice.pdf>>

¹⁹ <<http://www.embavenez-us.org/factsheet/Cont%20paper%2023%20september%202008%20social%20economy.pdf>>

²⁰ VIO, “Democracy in Venezuela: The 2008 Latinobarometro Poll” retrieved July 24, 2009, <<http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Democracy%20in%20Venezuela%20-%20Latinobarometro.htm>>

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