

that this will not be necessary, and that the government's strategy will change. In the first place, we are all going to agree that from now on, we will act like Brazilian citizens. . . . As citizens, we must inform the government that we demand an immediate halt to the liquidation of our national patrimony. As Brazilian citizens, we must demand that the media free itself from the economic censorship so ostentatiously imposed by the government. The other sectors should

clearly make their demands known. To be silent is to approve, and to approve is to destroy the Brazilian nation. All these demands should be addressed, but without violence. This would end up hurting our brother patriots.

The deadline for the government to respond will be May 1, when we must then shout in a single voice, so that everyone can hear our final warning: "I am proud of being a Brazilian citizen, and I will not permit my nation to be destroyed!"

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# Hugo Chávez's Venezuela: Little Bread, But Many Circuses

by David Ramonet

In the fourteen months of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías's government, poverty levels have reached 86% of the total population, such that the only real buying power that exists today is concentrated in the top 14% of Venezuelans. The draconian austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and enforced by the Chávez government, has drastically restricted public investment, and the constant threats against Venezuela's business class have led to a virtual freeze on private investment and the flight of some \$5 billion out of the country.

According to the polling firm Cifras Encuestadora, C.A. (CECA), only 14% of the population—a little more than 3 million people—have an income of more than \$750 a month, enough to cover the cost of the basic market basket of food and services. The rest, some 20 million Venezuelans, are forced month to month to do without some basic service (electricity, telephone, rent, transportation) in order to guarantee food for their families. Nine million Venezuelans, some 38% of the population, have a monthly income of between \$300 (the cost of a monthly food basket for a family of four) and \$750. The other 11 million Venezuelans, 48% of the population, lack the income to fully cover their food needs.

Unemployment affects one-fifth of the workforce, and of the rest, 51% survive through the so-called "informal economy," without any social security protection. Of the 49% who are regularly employed, those in the public sector suffer the worst, because President Chávez refuses to negotiate with the unions, and to date, has not signed a single one of the various collective bargaining contracts that have expired.

With this disastrous picture of the national economy, it should come as no surprise that the crime rate has risen dra-

matically, to the point that the daily newspapers say that more people die from some kind of crime each weekend in Venezuela, than in Kosovo.

## A Man of the Mob

In the face of all this, how, then, does Chávez manage to retain some support among the population? Polls are still giving Chávez a 20-point advantage over his opponent, Francisco Arias Cárdenas, in the next Presidential elections.

In his speeches, and in his long televised harangues, Chávez mercilessly abuses, insults, and humiliates all the traditional institutions, and the individuals who represent them, in order to give the mob a concrete "image of the enemy," so that they will know, without the shadow of a doubt, who are to be the targets of attack: the unions, the bishops of the Catholic Church, the business class, the media which criticize him, the journalists who do not praise him. All of these are "guilty" of creating misery for the ragged ones; they are all "accomplices, or guilty of having remained silent," according to Chávez.

According to Chávez, the measures of the IMF, of the institutionalized usury which has been taking over the world for the past quarter-century, have nothing to do with Venezuelans' growing misery. To be sure, he periodically launches verbal attacks on "savage neo-liberalism" or "savage globalization," to distinguish these from "neo-liberalism" and "globalization," which latter, according to Chávez, are not "savage." He never mentions the globalist financial oligarchy which, under the leadership of George Soros, offers "foreign investment" to those governments drooling

after the predatory speculative capital to which Chávez so often refers.

Rather, Chávez instills in Venezuela's *lumpenproletariat* (German for "proletariat in rags")—the real audience to whom he directs all of his speeches—a sense of moral impunity regarding the daily abuses they suffer, and he leads them to believe with a zealots' rage, that their anti-social actions have the merit of heroism. From the first day of his inauguration, in February 1999, Chávez has told the mob that anyone is permitted to steal in order to satiate their hunger. Later, Chávez justified invasions on the part of those who don't have their own homes. Then, Chávez also justified the peasants who invaded cultivated lands and threatened to expropriate the landowners.

Chávez bases his political power on the lumpenized poor, on the sense of impunity which he provides the petty criminals who have come to dominate the giant slums which make up Venezuela's cities, whose ranks have been swollen by ten years of IMF policies. This identity is what Chávez now wants to transform into the national culture. The lives of the majority of the people in the slums are shaped by these criminals: circuses without bread, but not the modern circus of clowns and tightrope walkers; rather, the infamous Circus Maximus, to which the pagan Roman proletariat flocked to see the lions eat the Christians. This is Chávez's "culture."

### Chávez's 'Church'

It is in this pagan Roman sense, that Chávez is a total Romantic, perhaps without knowing, in the same way that he follows Hobbes's *Leviathan*, perhaps without having ever read it. He constantly repeats the slogan of the Roman imperial looters: *Vox populi, Vox Dei*—i.e., "the voice of the people is the voice of God: The people are with the Bolivarian revolution, so therefore God is with the revolution." This reflects a completely pagan notion of God, and a completely bestial notion of man.

Chávez has no comprehension, either theological or secular, of what the Catholic Church represents as an institution that spans the millennium. Chávez has a syncretic understanding of religion, as the president of the Venezuelan Bishops Conference (CEV), Msgr. Baltazar Porras, has pointed out. Porras's incisive and penetrating criticisms have, in fact, made him a special target of Chávez's personal animosity.

Monsignor Porras has been described as a Church "progressive," which lends his criticisms of Chávez even more authority. Porras recently stated that "there is among us a great concern over the deterioration of the economic situation, and we see how citizens' insecurity, unemployment, social conflict, are part of everyday life," and, also that "we are concerned over the juridical deterioration in the country; there is a questioning of constitutional legality." Chávez answered from Havana, Cuba, that Porras's statements were "very irre-

sponsible," and were the simple result of the fact that Bishop Porras "belongs to the past regime," and is therefore an "accomplice" of the theft and corruption of previous governments.

Chávez's outburst prompted the leadership of the CEV to issue an Open Letter, in which they simply reiterated what everyone in Venezuela knows, and what the press summarizes daily. Above all, the Open Letter tried to explain to Chávez that if he wishes to maintain an institutional relationship with the Church, then as head of state, he must do so through his representatives, and with mutual respect.

In his first response to that letter, Chávez made it clear that, for him, his church is "the people"—which as we see, means for Chávez a lumpenized mob, which rebels against the society which marginalizes it, under the impunity granted it by the Chávez regime. His religious conception is sociological and pagan, inspired by the "ideas" of the Nazi-Communist Argentine ideologue and anti-Semite Norberto Ceresole, Chávez's mentor in many "intellectual disciplines."

According to Chávez, "Jesus thought and believed, like all revolutionaries, that the assembly of men was a great power. What we are talking about here, is unity, the collective force, that is the force of Jesus. He came for men, for everyone; He was not important, He was the least, so much so, that I remember from my high school studies that religion means assembly, the gathering of we who believe in Jesús, in Christ.

"So, I have no doubt that the Venezuelan Catholic Church is with the revolution, because the Church is the people, the *ecclesia*, which is the gathering of everyone," he insisted.

At a May 1 meeting where he launched his electoral campaign, Chávez reiterated, "Christ was resurrected from the dead, to become the People, and rose to sit at the right hand of the Father to help the People." And if Monsignor Porras doesn't believe this, it is because "he is an *adeco*—that is, a partisan of the old discredited Democratic Action party."

In other words, the lumpenized mob, elevated by Chávez into a "Church," with Chávez as its head priest, is preparing to trample down the majority of Venezuelans, under the pretext that "Christ is with the revolution."

### The Clamor Against Chávez

On May 28, general elections will be held to elect new national and local officials, in accordance with the new Bolivarian constitution drafted and rubber-stamped by Chávez loyalists in 1999. Chávez's re-election depends on whether he can impose upon the electorate his concept of *vox populi*, which he identifies as "the sovereignty," with the assistance of a National Electoral Council completely dominated and controlled by the Chávez government.

Chávez is being challenged for the post of President by one of his former companions from the Feb. 4, 1992 coup attempt led by Chávez, the former Governor of the state of

Zulia and supposed ideologue of the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 (MBR-200), ex-Commander Francisco Arias Cárdenas.

Chávez broke with his old MBR-200 comrades after ex-Commander Jesús Urdaneta Hernández, the former head of the political police, the Disip, accused Luis Miquilena, one of Chávez's mentors and the strongman of his government, of corruption and influence-trafficking. Miquilena, a veteran ex-Communist, was also leader of the Fifth Republic Movement, Chávez's electoral movement. Chávez defended his mentor, and forced Urdaneta's resignation. In that context, Arias Cárdenas launched his Presidential candidacy, backed by the majority of the military officers who had been involved in the 1992 rebellion.

Arias's candidacy was immediately accepted by the political opposition, which views Arias as the best option for "getting that madman out of Miraflores," the Presidential palace. Until then, the only other contender against Chávez was former Presidential candidate of the Democratic Action party in 1993, Claudio Fermin. However, Fermin is closely identified with the hated ex-President Carlos Andrés Pérez, and has zero chance of winning. Thus, the great majority of the population have embraced Arias's candidacy as providential, with a sense of relief, and the hope that "now we will be able to defeat Chávez."

By repeating the criticisms of Chávez from all the different social sectors, Arias has pulled together a wide variety of political currents, ranging from Social Democratic and Social Christian trade unions, to the independent trade unions of the Causa R party; from the groups who put forward Henrique Salas Romer's candidacy in 1998, to the leftists of Bandera Roja; and above all, to all the groups which have abandoned Chávez's "Patriotic Pole" coalition, charging that it has become a "clearly fascist" government.

It is estimated that this sector of disillusioned former Chávez supporters represents some 25-30% of the hardcore vote that Chávez won in 1998. Furthermore, Arias's candidacy has awakened the spirit of many youth, who are coming out in droves to register to vote for the first time. This phenomenon has begun to worry Chávez's people on the National Electoral Council, who have contrived to sabotage the registration process, forcing new voters to wait on lines for up to eight hours—something they have thus far stoically tolerated.

Members of the Venezuelan military will also be voting for the first time. Although the military vote is not decisive quantitatively (some 70,000 votes, out of an electorate of 11 million), the institution has important political influence. The only poll that has been taken of this sector, yielded a result of 70% in Arias's favor, and 30% for Chávez. After that, polls of the military have been prohibited. According to some newspaper reports, some of the cadets who were polled have been disciplined, because their opinions are considered "po-

litical proselytizing." In any case, Defense Minister Gen. Ismael Hurtado has already stated, in the company of the entire military command, that the National Armed Force (as the new Bolivarian constitution calls it), will adhere to whatever results the upcoming vote produces.

However, the broad-based opposition coalition has little chance of standing up to Chávez's mobs, and to the Chávez-dominated electoral apparatus. Further, an Arias government is no guarantee of change, from a strategic and economic perspective. It is a pragmatic coalition, formed around the urgent necessity of "getting that madman out of Miraflores, and later we will see what to do," as one coordinator of the Arias campaign stated. All of the backing that Arias has received has, in effect, been given him by Chávez himself, who has drawn all of this ill-will upon himself because of his inability to govern, his arrogance, and the generalized perception that his government "is as, or more corrupt, than any other."

### **'Public Virtue, Private Vice'**

Using the pretext of the need for a "provisional regime" to rule between the time of the proclamation of the novel Bolivarian Constitution and the election of new authorities under that Constitution, Chávez and Miquilena constructed a carefully selected bureaucracy out of what had been the National Constituent Assembly (ANC), which carries out the functions of the legislative, judicial, and electoral branches. Every one of its members were handpicked by the divine prophet of lumpenism from among the hard core of the Chávez movement. Miquilena, who had presided over the ANC, became the head of its replacement, the so-called "Little Congress," the grouplet which functions as the provisional legislative body.

Thus, Urdaneta's corruption charges fell under the province of the Prosecutor General, Javier Elechigerra, elected by Miquilena and Chávez's ANC, who had previously served as Chávez's Attorney General, that is, as the government's lawyer. As a result, it was the accuser, Urdaneta, who ended up being charged with unexplained enrichment, along with the head of the campaign of Chávez's opponent, Arias, Col. (ret.) Jorge Garrido, who was charged with embezzlement of funds when he was the president of the Urban Transport Fund.

As for Miquilena, the Prosecutor's office passed his case on to the Supreme Court of Justice, without a formal charge, instead requesting that the court decide if the case had sufficient merit to be brought to trial. Thus, the Prosecutor's office protected both the regime and its strongman. For his part, Urdaneta's successor in the Disip, Eliezer Otayza Castillo (who was only a lieutenant when he retired from the Army, but was given the rank of captain by Chávez when he began his government and put in charge of security at the Presidential Palace), suspended the investigations begun by his predecessor.

According to *El Universal*, the fact that Otayza “was not very long ago a night-club stripper, is, judging by the reaction, of little concern to the masses.” For his part, the director of the national political police argues that “my personal life is my personal life. What I do in it interests, simply, the author and the protagonist of it. I know how to differentiate my private and my public lives. What is important, is that one does not involve the other. There is a concept, going back to the Greeks: ‘Public virtue and private vices.’ I very much believe in this.”

Perhaps this is a “principle,” but not exactly tracing its heritage to the Greeks, but rather to pure British liberalism, something he should have learned better in his post-graduate studies of sociology and philosophy. But Otayza is not the only one in the Disip who practices this “principle.” Otayza’s director of investigations at the Disip, who should have continued the investigations into Miquilena, is Commissioner Enoé Vasquez, against whom there is a whole other file for sexual harassment of officers of the women’s division of the Municipal Police of Salias when he was deputy director of that institution, from which he was dishonorably discharged.

Another follower of this “principle,” is the new president of the People’s Bank, a former priest who ran a house for poor children, the which he had to leave at the point when his ecclesiastical retirement was requested, after he got a lady

pregnant. Chávez put his former priest on his Sunday radio program, “Hello, President,” to rant against the hierarchy of the Catholic Church on Palm Sunday, in one of Chávez’s many attempts to provoke a split within the Catholic Church, the which today is more united than ever in the face of systematic attacks against it by President Chávez.

The current National Electoral Council (CNE)—supposedly “impartial” because no representative of the opposition parties serves on it, but whose five principal members and their alternates all come from Chávez’s coalition—was also handpicked by the National Assembly. But besides controlling the leadership, Chávez’s Fifth Republic Movement also installed 32 “technical” officials in the central headquarters of electoral board, and 150 in the rest of the country, who constitute the “technical infrastructure” which will run the automated voting system. And as if that were not sufficient, the directors of the National Electoral Board fired the state coordinators in Zulia and Nueva Esparta, two of the states which Chávez’s movement, the MVR, is more likely to lose, and they are about to fire another ten state coordinators, including that of Carabobo, another of the difficult states for the MVR.

All these irregularities, it should be noted, have been ignored by the Carter Center and other “international observers” of the upcoming elections.

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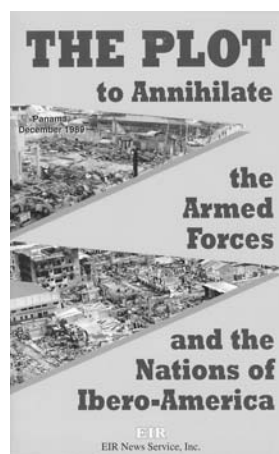
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