

# Report from Venezuela

El Libertario (Venezuela)

2007

Note. *El Libertario*, the voice of the Comision de relaciones anarquistas of Venezuela, analyzes the how and why of the increasing state repression against the growing social discontent that belies the pseudo-revolutionary discourse of the Chavez regime. See also: "In Chavez's Venezuela" in this issue.

The latest annual report on the human rights situation in Venezuela compiled by the non-governmental organization (NGO), Provea, estimates that between October 2005 and September 2006, 58 demonstrations were repressed in the country. If we add to this the 16 protests violently dissolved between October and November, the number climbs to 74 cases: Two students, José Gonzalez (in Cumana) and Dave Parker (in Trujillo) died last year as a result of repressive police actions.

This study also shows at least 71 injuries by bullets, bb's, blows, choking and other mistreatment, compared to 49 cases in 2005 against protesters. In the same vein, cases of violations of the right to personal liberty show an increase of 60 percent, with 130 arbitrary detentions versus 81 for the 12 months of 2005. In 55 percent of the cases, the repression was at the hands of regional police, while 45 percent were committed by the National Guard. Only six cases, 23 percent of the total, took place in the city of Caracas. ([www.derechos.org.ve](http://www.derechos.org.ve))

These numbers are in contrast to official declarations stating that repression of protest is a thing of the past. "This is not a government that tramples, that assassinates, tortures or represses anyone. That happened during the Fourth Republic; President Chavez's government does not have its hands stained with Venezuelan blood," Vice-President Jose Vicente Rangel said in December, referring to the numbers published by the NGO.

## Us vs. them: the logic of polarization

The high expectations created by Venezuela's executive and their scant materialization, with the exception of the Misiones assistance programs, start to wear out the charismatic domination represented by Hugo Chavez, in spite of the seven million votes that made his re-election possible. His first presidential period was characterized by strong political polarization that created the favorable conditions for subordinating grass roots dynamics to the ballot.

This unconditional loyalty has taken hold because the continuous reiteration of the binary logic: a revolutionary, patriotic and Bolivarian "us," perceived as the good guys; versus the adversary, the imperialist, counterrevolutionary and traitor "other," seen as the bad guys.

Any opposition is interpreted as manipulation by the foreign enemy (imperialism) whose hypothetical confrontation demands the permanent reiteration of unity and loyalty. This reasoning prevents and subordinates not only the dialogue with the "other," but also regulates the interchange among "us" by subjecting it to the will of the leader. A clear example is the debate about the building of the so-called "united socialist party."

The executive's rhetoric has capitalized on popular resentment against the distribution of wealth and power during the first forty years of the country's democracy. The strong resolve for social change generated during the

80s and 90s became possible as a result of the high oil prices and an aggressive fiscal policy that have allowed the government a sustained period of huge income, one of the highest in Venezuela's history. However, the timid advances in social matters do not correspond to the economic windfall which permeates the popular sectors while continuing to further enrich the wealthy globalized elites. As time goes by, love, even its Bolivarian kind, cannot endure on empty promises.

As explained by Max Weber, charismatic domination means that the presidential figure embodies magic-religious attributes, and historical predestination. Governmental contradictions and shortcomings, therefore, are attributed to the mundane limitations of its functionaries. Demonstrators mobilize against ministers, mayors, governors, police and military agents, but, for now, not against the presidential figure. To set themselves apart from the protests of the "other," they claim in different ways their identity as "us."

Along with the country's centralization, the majority of the protests have happened in places other than Caracas, a city where the budget trickle down is greater and has greater accessibility. The executive knows that a demonstration in the capital, whatever its size, is exponentially more visible than if it happens in the provinces, which also explains their efforts to diminish them.

## **The retaining walls**

During the first governmental period, the cooptation and neutralization of protest was made possible due to a number of reasons. First, the high expectations created at Miraflores (the presidential palace in Caracas). Second, the imposition of polarization and the reduction of social conflicts to the electoral farce thus imposing self censorship upon expressions of discontent. Third, the idea of an external enemy and its hypothetical and imminent armed aggression. Fourth, the neutralization and bureaucratization of grass roots leaders. Fifth, the creation of a whole gamut of institutional channels to control participation and demands. And sixth, the progressive delegation of police and surveillance functions to the citizenry under the guise of "social intelligence" and "civil-military alliance".

The interaction of these elements means that in order to manifest itself, protest must pass a series of roadblocks and, only as a last resort, neutralization by the use of the state's security apparatus becomes necessary. About the latter we must remember that the "Bolivarian Revolution" didn't substantially change any of its armed components, its structure, or the traditional paradigms of control of citizens' protest.

If, during its first years in power, the government could show very small numbers of detentions and injuries in popular demonstrations, it is simply because they didn't exist, and not because the police had assumed different strategies for the resolution of conflict than in the past.

Some of the conflicts-demonstrations against coal mining in the state of Zulia, mobilizations of street vendors in Caracas in October, and the recent occupation of the Guiria International Port-show that the greater part of the neutralization work has been done not by the police, but by sectors of the "us."

In October, the street vendors of the capital called a demonstration to call not for the 10 million votes for Chavez, but for an agenda of demands decided upon by themselves-the building of the promised commercial centers for street vendors, their inclusion in Social Security and the Communal Councils, as well as a pension for retirement.

The demonstrators declared that the march was for worker's rights, and to avoid the electoral theme-although at times they did chant slogans in favor of the president-they wore grey shirts with the area where each works stamped on the back. The march passed calmly through the city center and ended in the rain with a rally at Avenida Urdaneta.

Twenty-four hours before the march, the center of the city was blanketed by flyers, rich in expletives, accusing the demonstration of being an opposition protest in camouflage. The day of the march, the official newspaper VEA suggested the presence of dark interests behind the street vendors: "Groups of agitators would take aim at the informal workers that toil in the streets and avenues of Caracas".

According to the paper, "Supposed paramilitaries would finance the street vendors at strategic locations of the Republic's capital to develop a plan to destabilize the democratic institutions." At the end of the march, the vendors

faced people identified as members of the official party Popular Union of Venezuela, who accused them of being “right wing infiltrators.”

At other times, demonstrations are explicitly postponed by “voices” of the social movements in accordance with the political agenda imposed from above. At the November monthly assembly of the Community Housing Organization and homeless groups that takes place at the Foro Libertador de Caracas, they were repeatedly asking from the dais that any protest be postponed until after the elections.

## **Upward solidarity**

Another characteristic of the mobilizations as well as of the social actors that carry them out is that vertical solidarity towards the charismatic leader supplants horizontal comradeship links and solidarity among equals. This complicates an understanding of these initiatives as social movements which are traditionally understood: collective initiatives with a shared identity, discourse and objectives, with the ability to react to aggression against one of its parts. Thirty-six homeless people were prosecuted in 2006 for crimes described in the Penal Code as trespassing and resisting authority. Some of them are, as of the time of this writing, still deprived of liberty. There have been no emails, demonstrations nor petitions for their release, neither from these homeless groups nor from other social organizations.

Several analysts agree that there will be an increase in social conflicts in 2007. With decreasing electoral activity, with the expectations still there, and with promises doubled, an increase in mobilizations for housing, services, and jobs is conceivable.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/375-spring-2007/report-venezuela>  
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