

The News International
December 3, 2006
A beautiful revolution

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

Six years ago an unknown lieutenant colonel was elected president of Venezuela. Though he won with 62 per cent of the vote, his legitimacy as the representative ruler of his country was challenged no fewer than five times. After every attempted coup, oil strike, and recall referendum he came back stronger and with a larger portion of the electorate behind him. His name was Hugo Chavez.

Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution -- named for Simon Bolivar, or El Libertador, the leader at the forefront of several Latin American independence wars in the nineteenth century -- of participatory democracy, economic justice, and socially endogenous development has revived the political imagination of Venezuela, and indeed much of the world, in the past six years.

Riding a wave of idealism and socialist experimentalism not seen since the days of Salvador Allende in the 1970s, Chavez has opened up a frontier of possibilities for his people. His first act as president of Venezuela was to convene a constituent assembly and draft a new, more just, constitution. The process of writing the new law of the land was one that welcomed public participation and student groups, women's organisations, and indigenous people's forums were actively involved through contact with their elected representatives. The very language that the constitution was written in was egalitarian and inclusive -- in Chavez's Bolivarian Constitution (a forewarning: everything is 'Bolivarian' now, in the event that I leave it out, just mentally add it in) both the masculine and feminine tenses were used, making it perhaps the only constitution in the world that in its very phrasing enshrined gender equality and explicitly affirmed the rights of women.

The Bolivarian Constitution's final draft was a document that guaranteed and protected all citizens' access to dignified housing, health care, and education, and defended the collective rights such of those of housewives, indigenous peoples, and commonly disposed economic groups such as fisher folk and landless peasants. It even included the very measures by which Chavez's presidency was threatened by his opponents: the right of the electorate to recall any elected official and subject them to a national referendum.

The constitution was overwhelmingly mandated, but just to make sure the people understood their rights not only was the actual text of the constitution sold on the streets for approximately \$2, but state television also aired programmes where viewers were faced with legal dilemmas and were then asked to use their constitution to resolve the issues.

Economically, Chavez has sought to enact a 'Twenty-first century model' of socialism so as to re-appropriate the vast wealth of Venezuela's natural resources for its people and has vowed an end to the neo-liberal stronghold the IMF had previously imposed on the country. He advocated a

system of endogenous development, with sovereignty at its core, as a viable alternative to neo-liberal capitalism, arguing that "endogenous development is the antithesis of exogenous development, in which all the impulses come from the outside... (Exogenous development) puts the people of each country against each other to see who can produce the most cheaply for foreign markets, who can drive wages, social, and environmental conditions to the lowest to win the war of everyone against everyone".

Micro credit schemes were initiated, agrarian reforms implemented, and food security for the Venezuelan people guaranteed through a domestic food production initiative. In a coup de grace -- and let me just come out and say it, I support nationalisation, so sue me -- Chavez nationalised Venezuela's oil reserves, the world's largest after those in the Middle East, forcing foreign companies growing rich off Latin American oil to pay dividends to the state for the first time in Venezuelan history. That money, along with new oil and gas profits, went to the people of Venezuela and was put to financing Chavez's many popular missions.

The missions – oh, there isn't enough space in this whole newspaper to cover the missions, but briefly: they were developed by the government to enact participatory democracy on the ground and engage the social ills of the country in a powerful and productive manner. Mission Barrio Adentro provides free primary health care in the slums of Caracas, aided by thousands of Cuban doctors sent by Fidel Castro, and ensures that medicines and doctors are available around the clock for those in need of care. Mission Robinson battles illiteracy and to date has taught over 1.5 million Venezuelans to read and write and was so successful in affording poor Venezuelans a high school education and diploma that the government is now in the process of opening up post-secondary and post-graduate missions.

Mission Mercal deals with food security and offers up to 50 per cent discounts on basic foodstuffs (the food at Mission Mercal's markets is supposed to be so good that the Venezuelan elite send their maids to the mission to buy their bread and milk for the week). The government also produces basic foodstuffs such as sugar, rice, and wheat and packages the goods simply so they remain affordable, but makes its mark by placing quotes from the constitution on the labels.

Halfway into his first term Chavez was asked about the myriad changes in his country and replied, "This is a different Venezuela, where the wretched of the earth know that they can free themselves from their past. And this is a different Latin America".

He couldn't be more right, and thankfully so. This year a storm has been sweeping Latin America: in Bolivia an indigenous native named Evo Morales swept the polls, the only change he made to the presidential palace was to place a portrait of Che Guevara at the entrance (he later nationalised the country's gas reserves, by the way); in Nicaragua the former Marxist Sandanista guerrilla Daniel Ortega has been made president; in Brazil Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, affectionately known as Lula, has won a second term and has placed the tackling of hunger at the forefront of his political agenda along with many other social programmes; in Chile a former victim of the dictator General Pinochet's torture squads and secret police was elected the country's first woman president; and in Ecuador Rafael Correa, a leftist promising the closure of American military bases on his soil, has just beaten Alvaro Noboa, a billionaire banana tycoon.

No more lame-duck military dictators, no more armchair economics, no more the terrorism of poverty and hunger. Imagine if that were possible here, in our country. It is.

Today Hugo Chavez goes to the polls and stands to win a second term as president. The writer Calvino once wrote "we can liberate ourselves only if we liberate others. There must be a fidelity to a goal, and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph. There must also be beauty". I, for one, cannot remember a moment in my lifetime where politics and the possibility of change have ever been so beautiful. Viva Chavez!