



**WESTERN UNION**

Send loved ones cash from your PC. Fast.

Send loved ones money from your PC.

**WESTERN UNION**

westernunion.com

### Contribute to Asian Tribune

Asian Tribune is an independent online news daily and we seek your support and contributions in kind and cash. If you consider our coverage as the loud and clear voice for Democracy, Rule of Law, Protecting Human Values, Dignity and Human Rights in Asia, then kindly consider making a donation to ensure our continued existence.

**We value your support and contributions.**

[VISA](#), [MasterCard](#), [American Express](#) accepted.

- Home
- Archives
- Webboard
- About Us
- Contact Us
- Advertisement
- Letters
- Job
- Disclaimer
- Link

Date : 2004-09-09

## "Democracy in the hills of Venezuela"

By Paul Harris - YellowTimes.org Columnist (Canada)

I'm sitting in front of a keyboard about 350 miles in a straight-as-the-crow-flies line northwest of Washington. But I swear I could hear the gnashing of teeth in the Oval Office when the results of the August 15 recall referendum in Venezuela were finally announced.

The last thing the Bush administration wanted was for the "people" to make the democratic choice they did, assuming Washington is actually interested in democracy at all. If the vote had gone the other way, then Democracy (with a capital D) would have been touted as alive and well in South America. But this result is clearly wrong, for the Bushoviks, so in their eyes the result cannot possibly have been democratic.

President Hugo Chávez Frias won a pretty convincing vote of confidence from the Venezuelan people. And he did so in the face of an onslaught of negative campaigning from the opposition, the Venezuelan media and the United States.

Chávez is considered to be trouble by the Venezuelan opposition and, even more so, by the U.S. His crime? He actually thinks the most important people in Venezuela are the people who most need a government, who most need to be freed from rapacious landowners and corporatists, who most need a little assistance to lift them out of poverty and sickness. But worse, he thinks that foreign powers and the International Monetary Fund need to keep their noses out of Venezuela's business and that foreign companies utilizing his country's resources should pay a fair price for the privilege.

The Bushoviks have a clear distaste for popular leaders worldwide because those leaders might not be in the hip pockets of the corporate world, might not be bought and sold easily, and might have a social conscience. Chávez is particularly disliked because he counts Cuba's Fidel Castro among his friends.

But Chávez is popular at home: the common people are his powerbase and, to them, he is a hero. To this point, he has accomplished some of what he has tried to do for the people but he has fallen far short, and the people know that. Still, they see the effort on their behalf and they are not going to forget this man quickly. And a point that should not be discarded as minor: it is not lost on any of those common people that when they look at their president they are seeing, for the first time ever, someone who is at least as dark as they are, and darker than most.

Chávez has been president since 1999. He is a former military man who participated in an unsuccessful coup attempt in 1992 which netted him a two-year jail term. The opposition often points out that he is a former paratrooper as if to imply that he was just a soldier and, therefore, somewhat less intelligent than a president needs to be. He does, however, hold masters-level degrees in military sciences and engineering. This is not a stupid or uneducated man.

After being pardoned for his part in the attempted coup, he emerged as a politician and organized a new party called the Movement for the Fifth Republic. He ran in the

**Horoscopes**  
Astrology.com

<a href="#">Aries</a>	<a href="#">Libra</a>
<a href="#">Taurus</a>	<a href="#">Scorpio</a> ★
<a href="#">Gemini</a>	<a href="#">Sagittarius</a>
<a href="#">Cancer</a>	<a href="#">Capricorn</a>
<a href="#">Leo</a>	<a href="#">Aquarius</a>
<a href="#">Virgo</a>	<a href="#">Pisces</a>

★ **Astrologer**  
Kelli Fox 

December 1998 election on an anti-corruption and anti-poverty platform while condemning the two major parties which have dominated Venezuelan life for more than 40 years. His campaigns in that election, a subsequent election in 2000 and the recent referendum have been opposed vehemently by the five major television networks and by most major newspapers and magazines. But still, the people elect him with comfortable majorities.

The president's policies have attracted the animosity of the United States, never a safe option for a Latin American leader. In particular, his friendship with Castro and Cuba and his oil policies have come under heavy criticism in Washington. Venezuela is providing Cuba about 60,000 barrels of oil a day in exchange for the services of a number of physicians, teachers and other professionals. This has helped improve Venezuelan health and literacy conditions, but raises hackles in the U.S. because it also helps revitalize the Cuban economy.

Chávez is a reformer; especially when it comes to land. Presently, 77% of Venezuela's farmland is owned by about 3% of the population but the president has infuriated that 3% by demanding a land reform bill that reallocates some of it to the landless. Despite the accusations that this amounts to "theft" and is dictatorial, it should be understood that the Chávez law would transfer only unused and abandoned land. Presently, half of the nation's farmers own only about 1% of the land; the largest number of Venezuelans own nothing and Chávez has vowed to change that.

And in a curious twist of history, Venezuela actually contemplated a similar step in the early 1960s when the dictator of the day agreed to dole out land to the landless but, deliberately or not, never gave the peasants title to the property. In a further twist, the present American régime which supports the Venezuelan landowners in their fight against this "land theft," appears to be unaware that the dictator who promised to transfer land to the peasants 40 years earlier did so at the behest of American President John F. Kennedy, certainly never known as a leftist radical.

By far, though, the policy that gets Chávez into so much trouble with Washington is his oil pricing policy. When he became president, the foreign oil companies had been extracting Venezuelan oil and keeping 84% of the proceeds. Only 16% made its way into the treasury. Chávez introduced the "Law of Hydrocarbons" to increase the country's take to 30%. Naturally, the oil companies and their oil-hungry friends in Washington object. Chávez believes that to be a more fair distribution of the proceeds of his country's primary asset and it is money he needs in order to finance many of the reforms he has promised, including his campaign to provide "pan y ladrillos" (bread and bricks) for the peasants living in cardboard shacks on the outskirts of the major cities.

The opposition in Venezuela calls Chávez "dictatorial"; an odd epithet coming from the country's elite who supported decades of dictators. Yet there is some truth to the accusation. The question neither asked nor answered is whether some measure of dictatorial power is what Venezuela presently needs to lift the nation out of misery. This country has tremendous resources, beyond the oil, but years of mismanagement have left the bulk of the people jobless, landless, hungry, sick or dying.

The leftist movement around the world needs to be paying attention to Chávez and learning from his successes and failures. Because there is some truth to the label "dictator," the leftists and other progressives are watching Venezuela with a jaundiced eye. They don't know quite what to make of this mix of democratic and dictatorial leadership, of policies that aren't easily described as revolutionary or anti-capitalist. And, of course, they worry that he will go the way of so many Latin American reformers: either quietly lining his own pockets with international funding, or lying face-down with a CIA-issued bullet in his back.

But the movement occurring in Venezuela appears to be real. It appears to be real people power, a real effort to improve the lives of the masses at the expense of the elite. Most important for progressives around the world, it appears to be a solid and serious alternative model of democracy, based on a highly politicized and well-established coalition between the head of state and grassroots people's

movements.

It is important that progressives, whether left-leaning or not, learn from what is occurring in Venezuela and support it as much as possible. Progressives cannot afford to let this movement be snuffed out before it even has time to fully ignite.

The Chávez reform movement is not without faults, not without perils and impediments. But it is something rare in Latin America ... it is democracy. Chávez introduced significant changes to the constitution intended to profoundly overhaul the organization of Venezuelan society and transform economics and politics. One small example is Article 73 of the new Constitution which requires that the state keep the citizenry informed of issues being negotiated in the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and their implications for Venezuela.

"International treaties, conventions, and agreements that could compromise national sovereignty or transfer power to supranational entities shall be submitted to referendum." So says Article 73. It may be driven by an anti-U.S. animus or anti-globalization or anti-Neoliberal thinking; but whatever motivates it, it is democratic. Chávez is building a broad-based participatory democracy that envisages new economic and social rights.

So far, the progressive and leftist movements around the world have failed to sit up and take notice. In large measure, that is the result of reading and watching domestic news coverage. As noted earlier, the five major television networks and most of the print media in Venezuela oppose Chávez and his movement. But the news reports broadcast in the outside world, except perhaps via the Internet, are obtained from those same sources. The media in Venezuela employs active members of the opposition parties as correspondents and news outlets around the world are basing their stories on the reports filed by those journalists. Since that is largely negative, the leftist movement has yet to get excited by what Chávez has accomplished and is continuing to push forward. Leftist movements and parties everywhere need to educate themselves about this remarkable revolution taking place and then to pressure their own governments to extend support to Venezuela.

And there is a history lesson that is surely on the mind of Hugo Chávez: In 1984, an election in Nicaragua, said to be the freest and fairest election ever held in that country, chose a new government and gave more than 60% of the vote to the Sandinistas, a leftist party. Right wing opposition groups, with funding and support from the United States, boycotted the election. In response to the vote, the United States covertly armed and supported an army of "Contras" to overthrow the legitimately elected government of Daniel Ortega. The US organized attacks on fuel storage tanks in Nicaragua's largest Pacific port, Corinto; they laid mines to damage foreign shipping in Nicaraguan waters to discourage trade; they trained and equipped the Contras who roamed rural areas in task forces, some as large as 600 men, attacking defenseless cooperatives and villages, burning clinics and schools, shooting teachers and health workers.

Chávez will not be unmindful of history and this knowledge may account, in part, for his continued anti-U.S. rhetoric. He may believe the U.S. will not tolerate his presidency and in the expectation that American foreign policy will follow its usual course, he may wish to make noise while he still can. Regardless of his personal fate, there is reason to believe that the sleepy backwaters of Venezuela have been awakened, and the customary form of American-supported oligarchy may have trouble trying to re-establish itself. And if the people of Venezuela can hold firm in their new-found democratic zeal, their experience might be exportable.

Washington showed recently by its ouster of Jean-Bertrand Aristide from Haiti that it has not changed its spots. Further, some of the people in government in Washington are the same people who conducted the covert support of the Contras, even in violation of U.S. law, let alone international law. In the days prior to the August 15 referendum, Chávez was predicting victory but he made clear he did not believe his real opponents were in Caracas or the hills and jungles of Venezuela: he stated clearly that he believes the enemy is George W. Bush.

It remains to be seen whether democracy in Venezuela will go unpunished.

- YellowTimes.org -

**Paul Harris** is self-employed as a consultant providing businesses with the tools and expertise to reintegrate their sick or injured employees into the workplace. He has traveled extensively in what is usually known as "the Third World" and has an abiding interest in history, social justice, morality and, well, just about everything. He lives in Canada.

Paul Harris encourages your comments: <mailto:pharris@YellowTimes.org>

**YellowTimes.org** is an international news and opinion publication. YellowTimes.org encourages its material to be reproduced, reprinted, or broadcast provided that any such reproduction identifies the original source, <http://www.yellowtimes.org/>

