

Venezuela's New Popular Movements Grow From Above and From Below

By Fred Rosen | November 22, 2005

Juan Contreras, a veteran community organizer in a working-class Caracas barrio, shows me around the barrio's new Casa de Encuentro, a meeting house and cultural center. The center just two months ago housed a much-feared unit of the Caracas Metropolitan Police.¹ On August 22 the building was seized by barrio residents led by Contreras and other activists from a neighborhood organization called the Simón Bolívar Cultural Coordinator (CCSB). The organization quickly converted the police headquarters into a community center.

The takeover was tacitly accepted by the mayor of Caracas, an ally of President Hugo Chavez and a member of Chavez's political party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR). The Metropolitan authorities, pressured by the militant CCSB which has considerable organizing power within the barrio, allowed the event to proceed peacefully. The police unit apparently had too long a history of selective community killings, torturing of prisoners, and general barrio repression for the new Chavista city government to credibly defend it. Rather than being reformed, it was abolished.²

The Rise of Barrio Power

The creation of the Casa de Encuentro was a major victory for the CCSB, and emblematic of the



Chavez supporters celebrate outside the Presidential palace after his victory in the recall referendum was announced. Photo: Venpres

power of social movements emanating from Venezuela's low-income communities. Social movements have diverse links to Venezuela's poor barrios. Some arose from within the barrios themselves and are autonomous from other political forces, while others have been created by the now-ruling party, the MVR. Still others are part of the broad Chavez political structure but have no formal connections to the party. Virtually all support President Chavez.

Although he supports Chavez, Contreras recently ran for the city council last year on a ticket opposed to the MVR. The CCSB entered into a strategic alliance with the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) to get a place on the ballot and came away with a close second-place finish to the winning MVR candidate. It is frequently Chavista versus Chavista in Venezuela's popular barrios. In mostly middle and upper class neighborhoods, opposition groups are more prevalent, many with allegiances to Washington. Autonomous opposition neighborhood associations also exist in some popular areas but the Chavez followers wield popular power in most poor urban areas.

Social movements have flourished here since Chavez's failed coup in February, 1992, and his televised, one-minute explanation of his motives. The "Bolivarian" uprising of junior officers lent momentum to an anti-party sentiment that had been building among the popular classes since the drastic implementation of neoliberal reforms by President Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1989. This momentum led to the entry of many previously



excluded citizens into political culture, and to the formation of many radical social movements focused on the day-to-day grievances of poor Venezuelans.

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Chavez’s coup attempt was seen by many—and especially by those without wealth or privilege—not as a conventional barracks attempt to seize power, but rather as a rebellious attack against a political structure that had become corrupt and self-serving and no longer able to deliver on its promises. It was also seen as an attack against a very specific set of market-oriented economic policies—policies that had cut social spending and raised the cost of living in the name of privatization, deregulation, and fiscal balance. While Chavez’s targeted constituency, the poor and excluded, showed no inclination to support a military coup—and in fact have displayed a remarkably strong commitment to the country’s institutions of representative democracy—the uprising succeeded in bringing large numbers of new participants into the political process, particularly from among the popular classes, and changed the climate and structure of Venezuelan politics.³

In Caracas and other major cities, these changes were underway before 1992, generated in part by the chaotic and tragic uprising, looting, and

repression known as the *caracazo*, a spontaneous popular response to the abrupt doubling of gasoline prices and hence bus fares on February 27, 1989. The death toll from the uprising and the government’s violent response was in the thousands. The momentum was sustained by the dramatic rise of two small leftist parties in 1992 and 1993, La Causa R and Movement toward Socialism (MAS), a rise that included the unexpected election of a Causa R candidate as mayor of Caracas in 1993.

As new actors entered the electoral fray, many new groups appeared on the community level to take action against appalling local conditions. One of those movements was the CCSB, located in the historically combative 23 de Enero neighborhood. The barrio, home to about 500,000 Caracas residents, was built during the regime of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in the mid-1950s as a complex of 98 buildings meant to house 60,000 people. When Pérez Jiménez was overthrown on January 23, 1958, the barrio acquired its present name, commemorating the date. Over the past half-century it has incorporated some 40 informally built squatter settlements into its boundaries. From the beginning the area seemed to breed militant activism, first in opposition to the dictatorship, then in opposition to the “elitist” democracy that replaced it in 1958.

Opposition to the government was at first ideological—many barrio militants took up arms in support of a Cuban-style guerrilla struggle. But later, long after the guerrillas had laid down their weapons, opposition stemmed from a widespread non-ideological perception that the dominant parties of the new democracy had no concern for the daily needs of the barrio’s residents: drinkable water, functioning sewage systems, public lighting, genuine police protection (as opposed to repression), and sufficient public and private living space amidst a swelling, informally housed and employed population. Venezuela experienced an explosive growth of its urban areas in the 1960s and 1970s as millions of impoverished, rural Venezuelans and Colombians surged into cities where plentiful low-wage, off-the-books work was available.

The new movements and organizations within the country's rapidly growing barrios tried to respond to community needs by exerting public pressure on federal and local governments. As they faced off against the ruling Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, they battled a combination of cooptation and repression. Political campaigns to counter repression joined with movements to demand public resources and services, and with "cultural" movements to improve daily life in the barrios. All these campaigns typically merged into united social movements.

These movements—born of hope, anger, and desperation—were receptive to Chavez's one-minute apologia following his failed coup in 1992. They identified with the fiery, televised speech that same day on the Senate floor by ex-president Rafael Caldera, blaming President Pérez's neoliberalism for the sufferings of the poor, only to be disappointed when Caldera, after winning back the presidency in 1993, took a similar neoliberal turn midway through his term in office. They understood the radical demands and proposals of La Causa R and MAS (only to be disappointed when the dominant wings of those two parties took the neoliberal turn along with Caldera); and they were and continue to be receptive to the anti-neoliberal, self-empowering rhetoric, proposals, and programs of Hugo Chavez.

Chavez Engenders New Political Class

Under Chavez there has been a rapid change in the composition of the "political class," people who take an active role in the affairs of state. Some complain that the result is that people with no experience have entered government, creating confusion and inefficiency. But the main asset of this fresh blood in politics is the permanent activism in Chavez's government, which draws on voluntary revolutionary commitment. This gives rise to a new kind of popular movement, created from above.

After Chavez took office in 1999, and even more so following his re-election in 2000 under a new constitution, his government actively encouraged the formation of new, pro-Chavez social



Chavez speaks outside the Presidential palace after his victory in the recall referendum.
Photo: Venpres

movements, and took the lead in forming popular organizations that were directly or indirectly accountable to the President himself. The first such organizations had already been created by the "Bolivarian" coup plotters following their pardon by President Caldera and release from prison in 1994. These were small groups called Bolivarian Circles, assigned the task of reaching out to peasants, students, and urban social movements. They organized local, regional, and at times, state-level assemblies to discuss the political situation and how best to bring about change.⁴

In time, the members of these Bolivarian Circles moved on to other tasks important to the Chavez cause. Two stand out: First, the formation of groups to organize pro-Chavez electoral campaigns, known at one time as Electoral Battle Units (UBEs), now called Electoral Victory Units (UVes). These electoral units operate parallel to the official party structure, are accountable directly to Chavez, and

draw on the same militants that once staffed the Bolivarian Circles.

Second, the “missions,” popular campaigns that work alongside state institutions to foster greater security, inclusion, and access to services among low-income Venezuelans. In brief, the principal missions are meant to a) provide food security via the establishment of bimonthly discounted open-air markets in popular areas; b) promote social and economic inclusion through a variety of educational programs, including basic literacy classes, high school education for adults, and higher study; c) promote economic inclusion through the creation of jobs and job training; and d) provide health services via the establishment of primary-care clinics, ambulatory services, and eventually public hospitals in poor areas.⁵ This last, called Mission Barrio Adentro, has become the best known, due to its employment of over 10,000 Cuban medical workers.

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Missions have proliferated over the past two years by calling into action members of the popular movements, many of whom work voluntarily or for very low wages. This meant that the same militants who had formed the Bolivarian Circles, if not working in an electoral campaign, became actively involved in missions. As a result, the Bolivarian Circles have virtually disappeared. Along with this fluidity is an informality of membership. These

have not yet (and perhaps never will) become corporatist movements. Participation can be momentary and requires no formal affiliation with the government or any political party, just loyalty to Chavez.

Independent and Government-Affiliated Social Movements

Community-based movements like the CCSB and party- or government-sponsored movements like the Bolivarian Circles, the UVEs, or the missions represent two different kinds of popular social movements. The first arise autonomously from the barrios; the second are created, financed, and nourished by the government or the party. In the current political moment, all are fiercely loyal to Chavez, but not necessarily to Chavez’s party, the MVR, and not necessarily to all aspects of Chavez’s governance.

While the community-based movements have not always articulated well with the government-supported movements, not all Venezuelan social activists see this division as being fundamental. CCSBs Juan Contreras responded to the question about two types of movements stating: “I don’t see it that way. We all have the same goals. The government has created its own popular organizations and we participate in those movements as well.”⁶

As president, Chavez has developed a remarkably strong rapport with poor and working-class Venezuelans. His long televised speeches have been typically aimed at the popular classes, rather than the middle classes or, much less, the elites. He carefully explains world events, basic geography, and national politics in ways that include people who have typically been left out of political debates. He urges his viewers to involve themselves in their communities, to pressure his own government to fulfill its promises and achieve its revolutionary goals. The speeches thus create an apparent dialogue between the President and the people. For most of his middle-class opponents, the speeches are patronizing, rambling, and demagogic, but for the historically excluded, the speeches show a willingness to democratize power, and to build accessible politics of respect, dignity, and social rights.

In this context, Chavez is at once a leader of a “revolutionary” political party (the MVR), an organizer of social movements that more or less suit the political purposes of the “revolution” (the UVEs, the missions), and a protector and motivating agent for all sorts of autonomous social movements that have their own demands (housing, women’s rights, potable water, etc.) and that fall outside the formal structures of government or broader political movements. There are even some middle-class groups that have organized under the banner of “the positive middle class,” to demonstrate that the Chavez presidency is not just supported by the poor. Members of these groups often flow from one group to another. There is no rigid structure of organization in the popular movements that have emerged from this process.

Redistributing Power Downward

Chavez has called for a “socialism for the twenty-first century,” though a striking aspect of his “revolutionary” proposals is just how modest they seem in the context of the past century of Latin American history. The platform focuses on public health care, public education, civic participation, more deliberate and efficient tax collection, land reform, and the reestablishment of state control over the country’s oil industry.

These proposals and actions are all meant to redistribute power and resources downward. They are also meant to mobilize popular support and participation, a mobilization made more effective through the use of revolutionary language, through the conveyance of the idea that Chavez is not simply the leader of “just another party,” and that “revolution” means a clear break with the present.

This public commitment to radical change, beyond the content of Chavez’s social programs, is what resonates with the social movements and with the popular classes in general. In the name of the Bolivarian Revolution, Chavez has encouraged landless peasants to claim title to idle largeholder farms and form cooperatives, and many have done so. He has encouraged urban workers to form alternative, autonomous unions, and many have done so. He has encouraged and protected the formation of a wide variety of urban popular

movements, and those movements have reciprocated with reverence and support.

His discourse keeps alive the hopes engendered by his initial rise to prominence and power and encourages many previously marginalized and excluded communities to participate for the first time in politics and self-help projects. Popular mobilization, whether from the ground up or from the top down, is as important to the political process as the content of the reforms themselves. That is the logic of the “revolution.” It is a logic, of course, that will have to deliver real benefits if it is to remain participatory and democratic.

“The process,” commented pro-Chavez union leader Luis Serrano in an interview this past September, “begins with Chavez and his motivational power, and then builds mechanisms through which to exercise power. But many have no point of reference other than that their leader is Chavez.”⁷

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RESOURCES:

The Simón Bolívar Cultural Coordinator has an interesting Website with some good photos of the barrio: <www.coordinadoracsb.org>

For a good source of English-language (generally Pro-Chavez) information on Venezuelan politics, see Venezuelananalysis: <www.venezuelanalysis.com>

For information that is critical of Chavez but appreciative of the role of social movements see PROVEA: <www.derechos.org.ve>

END NOTES

- ¹ Thanks to radio journalist Raul Zelik for interesting background on 23 de Enero and for introductions to several activists, including Contreras. Also thanks to Steve Ellner, for his valuable insights into Venezuelan politics.
- ² Conversation with Juan Contreras, Barrio 23 de Enero, Caracas, Venezuela, September 22, 2005.
- ³ Moisés Naím, "The Political Management of Radical Economic Change," in Joseph Tulchin, ed., *Venezuela in the Wake of Radical Reform* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 147-178.
- ⁴ Margarita López-Maya, "Hugo Chavez Frías: His Movement and his Presidency," in Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger, eds., *Venezuelan Politics in the Chavez Era* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp 73-92.
- ⁵ Neritza Alvarado Chacín, "Gestión social, pobreza y exclusión en Venezuela a la luz de las Misiones Sociales," *Revista Venezolana de Análisis de Coyuntura*, (Caracas) Vol. X, No. 2, July-December, 2004.
- ⁶ Conversation with Juan Contreras, Barrio 23 de Enero, Caracas, Venezuela, September 22, 2005.
- ⁷ Interview with Luis Serrano, Barcelona, Venezuela, September 26, 2005.

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