

Venezuela's tragedy: trapped by natural disasters and Chávez's constitution

by David Ramonet

Dec. 15, 1999 will remain engraved in the memories of Venezuelans for many years, not as the day that Venezuela's new constitution was approved in a referendum by a mere one-third of eligible voters, but as the day that the laws of nature imposed themselves over the arrogance of rulers.

The incessant rains that had been whipping the Venezuela coastal area for more than a month, had already forced Falcón state to be declared a disaster area. And, according to various sources, President Hugo Chávez had already been urged to take emergency measures and postpone the constitutional referendum. But, Chávez viewed the referendum as the "decisive battle" of his "Bolivarian movement," and decided to run the risk of increasing the number of casualties of his "peaceful revolution" to assure victory in his decisive battle.

The referendum was an essential part of Chávez's ransacking of Venezuela's national political institutions, along the lines of what the Jacobins did during the French Revolution (see Dennis Small, "Justice vs. Jacobinism," *EIR*, Oct. 8, 1999). Chávez's project was approved by 32% of eligible voters, with an abstention rate of 55%. The official vote was 71.2% "Yes" to 28.8% "No."

One woman who had lost her home and seven of eleven family members to the mudslides that claimed tens of thousands of lives in just a few days, told an interviewer that it all began "when the President was talking about the vote, and said that 'if nature opposes us, we will defeat nature,' and by then the waters had already taken 2,000 people. . . . You just don't play with nature; you don't play with God." Caracas Bishop Msgr. Ignacio Velasco said, "The fury of God was unleashed in the face of that man's arrogance."

The woman was referring to the message Chávez gave at the conclusion of the referendum vote, when he announced that there would be no celebration of the pro-constitution vote, because the floods had driven Venezuela into mourning. In the middle of his speech, he repeated what Simón Bolívar had said after the 1812 earthquake, when the revolution for independence had just begun: "If nature opposes us . . ."

But at that moment of Chávez's speech, the worst had not yet even happened. In the early morning of Dec. 16, the gulleys that run down Mount Avila, the mountain range which separates Caracas from the coastal area and the port of La

Guaira, became raging rivers that swept away a large part of the port and surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the luxurious residential and tourist area and fishing villages; toward the south, other rivers flooded the poor neighborhoods located in the gulleys of the mountains that surround Caracas.

A campaign of hate

The "No" vote represents the middle class, professionals, trade unionists, skilled workers, and entrepreneurs, who through their organizations, neighborhood associations, and parent-school institutions, spontaneously set up soup kitchens to feed the disaster victims, and readied school and social centers to shelter them, even as the stupefied government looked on helplessly.

The solidarity which surfaced in every part of the country, led by that 29%, gave the country hope in the midst of all the desolation. It was the "No" voters working for the "Yes" voters, following an electoral campaign headed by Chávez which was marked by vilification and slander of all those who opposed his project: the Catholic Church, businessmen organized in the Federation of Chambers of Industry and Commerce, the trade union leadership, and so on. In contrast to the "implacable persecution" Chávez led against his political opponents, the Colombian narco-terrorists in the FARC and ELN have been accorded Chávez's "neutrality," dialogue, and respect for their "sincerity."

Without realizing, perhaps, that he was citing from Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Chávez maintained that "God is with the 'Yes,' because the voice of the people is the voice of God, and the people are with the 'Yes.'" As far as Chávez was concerned, "the devil crept in under the vestments" of the Catholic bishops who criticized his constitution project. The businessmen were accused of having enriched themselves in the shadows of corruption of the past 40 years. Ironically, one of the businessmen who is today supporting Chávez, Carlos Sequera Yépez, had once been sought by the police of Lara state for fraud against his partners and employees.

On Dec. 15, the country was divided by the campaign of Jacobin hatred unleashed by President Chávez. On Dec. 16, the country had joined together to help their less fortunate

compatriots, under the leadership of that very opposition which Chávez had so brutally denounced.

Demagoguery and hypocrisy

The promoters of the new constitution insist that their project is against free-market neo-liberalism, and that those who oppose it simply want to preserve their privileges. But after the National Constituent Assembly (dominated by Chávez's people) voted up a resolution on Dec. 22, calling on the country's creditors to forgive Venezuela's foreign debt because of the catastrophe, Chávez declared that "the debt is sacred," and that it would be paid on time next year, as budgeted. As Isabel Alcega Mendoza, the coordinator of the Ibero-American Solidarity Movement in Venezuela (co-thinkers of Lyndon LaRouche), stated in an article in mid-December in the daily *El Globo*, thus far, the Chávez government has imposed the most neo-liberal program to have been carried out in the past 10 years, totally adhering to International Monetary Fund prescriptions.

In fact, the constitution is simply a "declaration of principles" by Chávez's "Bolivarian" cult, which he now intends to impose on all Venezuelans, as former Attorney General Jesús Petit de Costa charged. It is a collection of norms which includes all the values of the New Age, such as indigenism, feminism, and environmentalism, all within a framework of Spartan statism which dominates practically every aspect of national social life: education, work, sports, culture, etc. In sum, a post-modern and existentialist variation of the bankrupt Maoist model.

The constitution extends the Presidential term to six years, with the possibility of immediate reelection, through which Chávez hopes to rule for at least 12 more years. The Senate has been eliminated, and the "Legislative Power" is invested in a unicameral National Assembly, on the French (or Cuban) Jacobin model. Nonetheless, Chávez defines the new Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela as "federalist and decentralized." To the three conventional powers are added "Citizens Power" and "Electoral Power," to give constitutional underpinning to the "fight against corruption" — which the World Bank and its non-governmental organization Transparency International have defined as the origin of all evil — to distract attention from the ongoing collapse of the current usury-based international financial system.

The Defense of the National Patrimony Foundation, represented in the National Constituent Assembly by its founder, businessman Luis Vallenilla Meneses, got included in the constitution the principle that the state will be absolute owner of the state oil company PDVSA, to prevent its privatization. But Chávez has added that the government should be free to sell its "subsidiaries," that is, the specific companies charged with exploration, exploitation, transport, and sale of crude oil, as well as the companies which PDVSA owns abroad, such as CITGO in the United States, or Veba Oel in Germany.

The National Armed Forces will be transformed into a single National Armed Force, which will permit Chávez to change, at the stroke of a pen, the country's entire military structure, given that promotions from the level of colonel on up will no longer have to go through Senate approval (as had been established by Bolívar as of 1813). Instead, they will depend solely on the President, as Commander-in-Chief of the National Armed Force. To win the support of the troops, Chávez's constitution gives them the right to vote, and eliminates the characterization of the military as "non-deliberating," meaning that the military will now be able to express its opinion on any political matter, as occurs today in Chile. Similarly, the military will have its own social security system, and the civilian comptroller will have no involvement whatsoever in the handling of its finances.

This is not a simple "national project," however, but part of a grand strategy on the part of the São Paulo Forum, the organization founded by Fidel Castro in 1990 to coordinate strategy among all the post-modernist leftist movements on the continent. For example, Article 14 of the new constitution observes: "The law will establish a special judicial regimen for those territories which, by the free choice of their inhabitants and with the acceptance of the National Assembly, join that of the Republic." As noted by Alberto Franceschi, one of the five members on the National Assembly who oppose Chávez, this article is designed for the FARC. The "Bolivarian Constitution" of Venezuela anticipates that the FARC will eventually declare the Colombian territory under its control to be an independent republic, and that "the population" (i.e., the FARC) will decide to annex it to Venezuela, thereby restoring the "Greater Colombia" founded by Simón Bolívar — and shattered, as Chávez has insisted, by the Venezuelan oligarchy in 1830. For its part, the FARC and ELN narco-terrorists have already declared themselves "Bolivarian," and have indicated their approval of the new Venezuelan constitution.

Chávez's constitution also includes a section which is apparently dedicated to Britain's Prince Philip, controller of the World Wildlife and its offshoot, Cultural Survival, on the rights of indigenous peoples. Article 119 not only guarantees respect for the customs and social, political, economic, and cultural order of "indigenous peoples," but also their "native rights to the lands that they have ancestrally and traditionally occupied, and which are necessary to be able to develop and guarantee their forms of life" (something not even Mexico's Zapatista "Sub-Commander Marcos" dreamed possible). Although Article 126 adds that "the term 'people' should not be interpreted in this constitution in the sense that is given in international law," it is nonetheless broadly known that there already exist organized indigenous groups which are seeking recognition as nations by the United Nations. Since the constitution recognizes these indigenous communities as "peoples," the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela may have set itself up to lose nearly half of its territory.