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Search:



Welcome Guest

Home > Blackworld > As Venezuela Boils, Blacks are Caught in the Middle

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Black like him? Chavez counts on his country's disadvantaged majority to stand by him. (AP Photo/Juan Carlos Solorzano, Miraflores Press)

As Venezuela Boils, Blacks are Caught in the Middle

With an opposition composed of labor, the media, the church, and most business leaders, whom does Chavez have on his side?

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Ever since the failed coup of April 2002, Venezuela has been teetering on the brink of economic and political collapse. The streets of the capital, Caracas, are flooded daily with marching workers, business leaders. A month-long strike by oil workers has further crippled the economy, causing long lines at gas stations and increasingly scarce supplies in city stores.

Rising unemployment, plummeting national currency and a paralyzed judicial system have, in the opposition's eyes, made the country ungovernable for strongman Hugo Chavez. Chavez, however, insists that a vote can't be held until August — mid-way through his six-year presidency — and that his opposition is merely attempting to provoke a coup to restore the corruption party system that existed before his rise to power. The National Elections Council has begun organizing a nationwide referendum on Chavez's rule, slated to be held February 2. With battle lines drawn and both sides digging in their heels there are daily marches, riots and skirmishes, and there is talk of a second coup and even of civil war.

With an opposition composed of labor, the media, the church, and most business leaders, whom does Chavez have on his side? Ironically, it is the country's long-marginalized black community that stands in the middle of

the debate. As Chavez has alienated the predominantly white political and business elite, he has appealed to the poor majority, who are black and Indian. Observers note that Chavez's populist rhetoric has exposed Venezuela's ethnic and racial fault-lines (the country's population is 21 % white, 10 % black, 67 % mestizo, and 2 % indigenous), and deepened the divide between the country's white middle and upper classes and the poor majority — some 80 % of the country's 24 million people live in poverty.

With populist rhetoric — not to mention copper skin and curly hair — Chavez is seen as a champion of the country's mestizo population (mixed people of black, Indian and white background) and he often appeals directly to the poor and non-white majority to counter the racism of the elite.

In the wake of strike-spawned gas shortages, Chavez has denounced the opposition's strike — sparked by his refusal to submit to an early election — blasting his enemies for the strike's side effects on the nation's poor. Chavez has frequently portrayed his opponents as not only opposed to his populist policies, but racists who despise him. "There's an incredible racism in this society," Chavez told the Spanish daily *El Pais*. "They call me the monkey or the black, they can't stand that someone like me was elected president."

A number of African American commentators have denounced US opposition to Chavez and expressed support for Chavez as a champion of Afro-Venezuelan rights. Glen Ford, publisher of *The Black Commentator*, excoriated National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice for her criticisms of Chavez: "White minorities hoard the bulk of social and material wealth across the width and breadth of Latin America. At times, the pale elite seems to prevail by default. Venezuela is breaking the mold... we should applaud the militancy of Caracas' dark shantytowns during the April crisis."

Opponents say Chavez is merely exploiting American conceptions of racial identity to garner African American support. Writing in Salon.com, one critic noted that "Mr. Chavez is the typical mestizo with some Indian blood. But he is no black. He might be a little darker than former President Luis Herrera Campin, but not by much."

Chavez has angered the Bush administration for years, openly praising the anti-globalization movement, and denouncing state leaders who "go from summit to summit while their peoples go from abyss to abyss." He also has ties with Saddam Hussein, Colombia's leftist rebels, and Fidel Castro; he even praised Cuba as a "sea of happiness!" Venezuela, the world's fifth largest oil producer, is a major US supplier, and the US has been concerned with Chavez's militant populism, despite the latter's insistence that Venezuela will remain a reliable supplier to the US.

During last April's attempted coup, the Bush administration could barely conceal its glee at the prospective ouster of Chavez, and Condoleezza Rice in particular angered many in the African American community with her anti-Chavez comments. Members of the Congressional Black Caucus wrote a letter of support to Chavez in May, expressing support for the president's call for dialogue and reconciliation, which he made after returning to power. Chavez, in June, thanked "these black brothers and sisters," and invited black members of Congress to act as observers and mediators in his proposed dialogue with political adversaries. CBC members have yet to Chavez up on his offer.

Writing in *The San Francisco Bayview* in late September, Alejandro Correa, a prominent black Venezuelan academic, described how Chavez had

improved the lot of black Venezuelans. For the first time, he argued, "Venezuelan people of African descent have total control of their historic black university, the Instituto Universitario Barlovento," where Correa is a professor.

"These dreams of the African Venezuelan people may be deferred if the United States replaces Chavez with a rightwing businessman as president," Correa went on. The article concludes with a plea to Americans "to write letters to the US Congress asking that the US respect the Venezuelan government and follow the rule of law and international treaties in dealing with Venezuela."

Prominent European political commentators such as Ignacio Ramonet, editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, have also argued that Chavez improved the lot of black and Indian Venezuelans, and that had incensed the white elite: "[T]he minuscule upper crust and the upper middle class, essentially white...are terrified of people of color, people with copper or black skin rising on the social scale. Here [in Venezuela], as in everywhere in Latin America, they occupy the lowest rungs of society. They [the white elite] would have to share their privilege, and that seemed unacceptable."

Experts have also noted the possible regional repercussions of a US-backed coup against Chavez. "Latins and Europeans are seeing US-Venezuelan relations as another example of Bush's blundering unilateralism," said Fernando Casado, editor of *La Voz Alterna*, a progressive Spanish magazine, via telephone. "Chavez is using Venezuela's oil earnings to provide basic services to the country's poorest, who happen to be black and Indian. Despite all the rhetoric, he is not a socialist."

Casado went on. "The US should be careful not to oppose this democratically elected leader just because he is seeking more control and profit from the country's oil resources. He is cleverly playing on Venezuela's class and ethnic divisions to build domestic and international support. An openly anti-Chavez policy will fuel anti-Americanism in Venezuela and in much of Latin America. The Bush administration should recall that in 1953 in Iran, the US overthrew Mossadegh, a populist leader who nationalized the oil industry, and put the Shah in place; this led to anti-Americanism, the Ayatollah Khomeini, and to the anti-Western fundamentalism we have today in that region. The US should proceed very cautiously."

Inspired by Simon Bolivar, the liberator of Latin America, Chavez introduced the Bolivar Plan, which involves the military in economic development, deploys soldiers to build state infrastructure, uses army barracks as schools and shares military medical facilities with the rest of the population. Chavez appointed generals to head the state oil company, and used the military to open hundreds of schools, many run by Cuban teachers, sent over by Castro in exchange for cheap oil.

Chavez's domestic and international opponents are worried by the increasing militarization of Venezuelan society, and point in particular to Chavez's "Bolivarian Circles," which the head of state claims are social self-help organizations, but which critics say are armed militias. Observers note while the middle and upper classes may dislike Chavez, the leader has the backing of the poor, black and indigenous, who believe in his "revolution," and who many say will fight for Chavez should another crisis arise - as they showed last April. Chavez has warned that the Bolivarian revolution is armed.

Whatever the upshot of the current unrest, Chavez is clearly counting on the support of the military and his black-Indian-mestizo majority. Referring to the April crisis, he notes, "Hundreds of thousands of people all over the country came out against the coup. And where did they go? They assembled at the army barracks, and they did so because of the existing understanding that had been built up between officers and civilians by Plan Bolivar."

Keenly aware of the Bush administration's displeasure with his rhetoric and alliances, Chavez has been conspicuously silent about the imminent toppling of his friend Saddam, and is actually using the prospect of a second Gulf War as an opportunity to ingratiate himself with the US. In the counter-demonstrations staged daily by Chavez' supporters, amidst the revolutionary speeches, large banners read "Venezuela and the United States, more united than ever."

Likewise, as war with Iraq looms, the US also seems to have backed away from its hard-line position last spring when it appeared to welcome the right-wing coup; now, to the disappointment of Chavez's adversaries, US officials are stating that they will not support an unconstitutional change in Venezuela.

Chavez likes to compare himself to Salvador Allende, the socialist leader of Chile who was removed from power through a US-backed coup. But Chavez also likes to note with wry confidence: "There's a small difference [between Allende and myself]. Allende didn't have the army on his side."

He might have added that Allende also did not have his country's black and indigenous majority on his side. As Aiskel Blanco, a radio producer and member of a Bolivarian Circle, told the BBC: "[In case of another coup] the people will descend from the hills, emerge from the barrios — the blacks, the marginalized. All Venezuelans will defend our president."

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