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AFRO-VENEZUELAN AND THE ANTI- RACIST STRUGGLE IN VENEZUELA

Afro-Venezuelans are more hopeful than ever about the social and political transformation occurring in their country today. Largely carried out in the name of the Bolivarian revolution, most reforms are aimed at addressing poverty, lack of education, inadequate health care, and disenfranchisement, all results of centuries of institutionalized racism and political and social exclusion.

The Legacy of Slavery

It is estimated that 62,000 Africans were forced into servitude and brought to Venezuela as slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of them were sent to areas that served as centers of the slave trade, particularly the central coastal states. In 1854, slavery was abolished and slave owners were paid by the government to set over 13 million slaves free.¹ Much like the history of the United States, freedom did not translate into equality.

In the 20th century, plagued by dictators, martial law, and corruption, racism in Venezuela flourished. In 1961 Indigenous communities were recognized in the constitution, albeit very superficially, while Afro-Venezuelans were excluded altogether. In part this was due to the way that racial politics operated in Latin America.

Counter to the U.S.' definition of blackness that categorized those of African descent as anyone with a drop of black blood in their veins and was based on ones appearance as non-white, Venezuelan racial identity rested largely on the idea that pure Afro-Venezuelans didn't really exist. Instead the majority of the population, including indigenous and Afro-Venezuelan communities, were considered mestizos-a mixture of African, Indigenous, and Spanish peoples. While certainly many Latin Americans claim this ancestry, many more don't. Despite this, today the majority of Venezuelans claim to be mestizo, the identity adopted as Venezuela's national identity. The age-old adage "we're all equal" is commonly expressed with the claim that racism doesn't exist in Venezuela. This may account for why even in the most recent 2000 constitution Afro-Venezuelans were not officially recognized.

Toward Official Recognition

Beginning in 1998 with the election of President Chavez who was the first President ever to claim and honor his indigenous and African ancestry, massive reforms were instituted to address many of the problems that affected the Afro-Venezuelan community.

It is estimated that Afro-Venezuelans today make up about 10-15% of the entire population.² However, official statistics are lacking due to past census polls that made no reference to the black

¹ Garcia, Jesus Chucho, Afrovenezolanidad e inclusion en el proceso bolivariano venezolanao, 2006.

² Ibid.

race. In 2004 however, a network of Afro-Venezuelan organizations proposed three questions to be included in the upcoming census that would identify the number, location, and make up of those identifying themselves as Afro-Venezuelans. Typical of the new administration's posture toward oppressed groups, The Ministry of Planning and the National Institute of Statistics welcomed the proposal and officially accepted it, marking a huge victory for those concerned with the rights of Afro-Venezuelans. For the first time ever in the coming years Afro-Venezuelans will be officially studied and counted.

The Impact of the Bolivarian Revolution

The most basic of human and social rights will also be extended to them. Throughout Venezuela's history, poor and rural citizens have lacked access to even the most basic health care or educational opportunities. Considering that cities and states with the largest Afro-Venezuelan populations face the highest levels of poverty, the recent social missions instituted by the Chavez administration have had a huge impact.

Education

Just ten years ago, Venezuela's illiteracy rate was nearly 9%, representing about 2 million people, primarily in rural indigenous communities and poor inner-city families. Today, thanks to massive literacy campaigns more than one and a half million adults have been taught to read and write in the past three years and many more are going back to school. Through subsidized education programs for primary, high school, and college age students the Venezuelan masses are partaking in education at increasing rates. Once too costly for most, education is now viewed as a right for all including drop outs and previously illiterate adults.

Health Care

Access to health services had been the most dramatic divide in Venezuela in recent generations. The vast majority of Venezuelans had not had easy access to medical treatment. A new Constitution, passed by referendum in 2000, became the first in Latin America to guarantee all citizens the fundamental right to basic health care. In order to meet this goal, Venezuela entered into a unique partnership with the government of Cuba, which provides 20,000 medical professionals to treat Venezuela's most needy. In the past five years, thousands of community health clinics have been established throughout the country. More than 60 percent of the Venezuelan population today receive some form of government-sponsored health care, and the results have been inspiring. Between 1996 and 2002, infant mortality rates decreased by 38 percent.

Today Venezuela has one of the lowest postnatal mortality rates in Latin America, and is on track to reach the United Nations Millennium Development health goals by 2015.

Political Participation

Another successful initiative has been Mission Identity, or *Mision Identidad* in Spanish. Established in October 2003 and carried out with the help of the National Office of Identification and Immigration (ONIDEX), Mission Identity aims to implement article 56 of the Venezuelan Constitution, which states:

All persons have the right to be registered free of charge with the Civil Registry Office after birth, and to obtain public documents constituting evidence of their biological identity, in accordance with law.³

³ Article 56, Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Essentially a massive citizenship and voter registration campaign rolled into one, Mission Identity has given millions of Afro-Venezuelans national ID cards, guaranteeing them their full rights as Venezuelan citizens.

Since the campaign's inception in 2003, electoral participation has grown tremendously in presidential elections and over 18 and a half million people have been issued new ID cards or updated their old ones.⁴

Afro-Venezuelans have not only exercised their right to vote but also their right to run for and hold political office. Under the Chavez administration Afro-Venezuelans have been elected and appointed to high level government posts. Never heard of before, currently an Afro-Venezuelan is a member of the President's Cabinet and many more occupy important posts as ambassadors and assemblyman.

Relations with Africa & the Caribbean

Venezuela has prioritized its relations with Africa by expanding diplomatic relations on the continent and opening embassies in numerous countries including Burkina Faso, Mali, Morocco, Congo, Angola, and many more. In total 18 missions are due to be opened in the next few years. Cooperative energy agreements have also been signed with many of these nations and health and literacy programs are in the works.

In the Caribbean many countries have been adversely affected by high oil prices. In response to this in 2005 the Venezuelan government initiated PETROCARIBE to ease the energy burden on the Caribbean by eliminating the middleman and directly providing countries with oil at market prices made affordable through the use of beneficial financing terms. This financing arrangement helps to ensure the energy security of member countries and stimulates their economic and social development. Currently, all Caribbean countries are members of PETROCARIBE with the exception of Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago.

A significant part of PETROCARIBE is aimed at aiding member countries in developing their energy infrastructure, improving the diversity of their energy sources, and increasing their energy efficiency. There are also plans to create the Alba-Caribe Fund which will gather the savings produced from these long-term financing agreements. The Fund will then be used to promote overall economic and social development in member countries, ensuring that benefits derived from this initiative substantially contribute to the fight against poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and lack of health care in member countries.

The Struggle Within the Struggle

While the Bolivarian Revolution has addressed the most devastating products of racism such as poverty, lack of health care, hunger, and inadequate education, some manifestations still exist.

The most striking is the struggle against the norm of mestizaje, which subtly promotes the acceptance of a mixed identity as better and "more Venezuelan" than a black or indigenous one. The Dutch anthropologist Bartolome Duysens likened it to a "myth of racial democracy" that "...

⁴ Electoral Registry Audit, August 2006 http://cne.gob.ve/documentos/auditoria_definitiva.pdf

subtly reinforces calls to improve the race through 'whitening'.⁵ Renowned AfroVenezuelan activist and scholar Jesus Chucho Garcia elaborates:

*The forgers of our Venezuelan identity proudly pronounce that we are 'mestizos' to the extent that we get 'whitened,' and from this stems the tragic awareness of the African or Indian identity of our contemporary symbolic components. These two constituting parts are depreciated or made invisible, when their positive contribution to the making of Venezuelan identity are not negated altogether.*⁶

Nevertheless, today Afro-Venezuelans are forging a new consciousness based on a recognition of and value for their African heritage within the larger society. Most anti-racist organizations in fact, have allied themselves with President Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution and have chosen to work as active members of it to address racism in their communities.

In coordination with many of the social missions, awareness campaigns about the historic, political, and cultural contributions of Afro-Venezuelans are being carried out across the nation. Most notably these education campaigns are beginning in communities with a large concentration of Afro-Venezuelans in order to combat the internalized racism that unfortunately plagues much of the continent.

The struggle to have Afro-Venezuelans officially recognized in the constitution, a call initiated by the Afroamerican Foundation and the Union of Black Women during the 1999 deliberations on the Constitution, continues to be fought for.

⁵ Duysens Bartolemo and Jesus Garcia. AfroVenezuelan Reflections: The Drums of Liberation, p. 41, Heraldos Negros, 1999.

⁶ Ibid. p. 23.