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## Afro-Venezuelans and the Struggle Against Racism

Venezuela is making unprecedented progress in combating the historical legacy of racism and recognizing the national importance of its African heritage. New government initiatives including reforms addressing poverty and inequality have afforded Afro-Venezuelans greater social, economic, and political rights.<sup>i</sup> Now, despite centuries of institutionalized racism and systematic political and social exclusion, Afro-Venezuelan citizens are experiencing gains that are the result of new action being taken by government and society.

### The Legacy of Slavery

An estimated 100,000 enslaved Africans were brought to Venezuela between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>ii</sup> Most were sold to the central coastal states, which drove an agricultural economy based in coffee and cacao. Abolition occurred in 1854, but freedom did not bring equality. Racism continued to flourish in Venezuela throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and African heritage was denied through an emphasis on racial mixing. The *mestizo*, born of European, Indigenous, and African blood, became a cornerstone of national identity. In this scheme, Blackness was devalued to such an extent that state policies sought to "whiten" the population through European immigration.<sup>iii</sup> Venezuela, like many other Latin American countries, used the idea of the *mestizo* to uphold a myth of racial democracy that denied rampant discrimination on the basis of skin color.<sup>iv</sup>

### The Impact of the Bolivarian Revolution

Hugo Chavez is the first president in Venezuela's history to claim and honor his Indigenous and African ancestry. Since his first election in 1998, reforms have been instituted to address the problems faced by the Afro-Venezuelan community and to extend to them important social, political, and economic rights. Historically, poor and rural citizens have lacked access to health care and education. Because 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:** Massive literacy campaigns and new educational institutions have allowed more than 1.5 million adults to learn to read and write, or to return to school. Due to subsidized education programs for elementary, high school, and college-aged students, Afro-Venezuelans are partaking in education at unprecedented rates. Once a privilege enjoyed by only a few, education is now considered a human right.

**Health Care:** In 1999, Venezuela became the first Latin American country to guarantee all citizens the right to basic health care. To meet this goal, a partnership was initiated with the government of Cuba, which has provided 20,000 medical professionals to treat previously underserved Venezuelans. In the past 5 years, thousands of community health clinics have been established throughout the country. Today, more than 60% of the Venezuelan population receives some form of government-sponsored health care. The results have been dramatic; between 1996 and 2002, infant mortality rates decreased by 38%.

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**Political Participation:** Since 2003, millions of Afro-Venezuelans have been issued national ID cards guaranteeing them the citizenship rights they previously lacked. Article 56 of the 1999 Constitution guaranteed all persons the right to free registration with the Civil Registry Office, a measure which has allowed electoral participation among Afro-Venezuelans to grow tremendously. In unprecedented numbers, Afro-Venezuelans are exercising their right to vote as well as to run for political office. Afro-Venezuelans occupy important posts in the Chavez administration as legislators, ambassadors, and assemblymen. It is the first administration in Venezuelan history to include a Black Venezuelan in the President's Cabinet.

### **Relations with Africa and the Caribbean**

Venezuela has prioritized its relations with Africa by opening 18 new embassies in countries including Mali, Morocco, Congo, Angola, Burkina Faso, and many more. The diplomatic initiative has been accompanied by cooperative energy agreements as well as programs in health and education.<sup>v</sup> In the Caribbean, Venezuela is helping ease the energy burden in many countries through a plan called PETROCARIBE, which provides countries with oil at market prices made affordable through beneficial financing terms. This aid provides member countries with energy and stimulates national and regional economic and social development. Currently, all but 3 countries in the Caribbean belong to PETROCARIBE.

### **The Struggle Within the Struggle**

Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has made great strides in addressing the racism that has been the legacy of slavery and its continued manifestations in high rates of poverty, hunger, disease, and illiteracy among Afro-descendants. Because obstacles still exist, the struggle against discrimination is moving forward. Afro-Venezuelans still lack constitutional recognition, though many are confident that future reforms will include legislation guaranteeing the political, economic, and social rights of the community. Though Afro-Venezuelans currently comprise up to 40% of the Venezuelan population, reliable census data is still lacking. Civil society groups such as the Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations are working to end the statistical invisibility that has been the handmaiden of marginalization. Plans are being made to improve the 2010 census, which many hope will bring self-awareness.<sup>vi</sup>

A new consciousness is being forged by Afro-Venezuelans who today recognize and value their African heritage within the larger society. Anti-racist groups in Venezuela have entered into powerful alliances with the government through initiatives such as the Presidential Commission to End Racial Discrimination, which was started in 2005. New awareness campaigns designed in cooperation with the social missions emphasize the national historical contribution of Afro-Venezuelans. Taking stock of the struggle against racism, the renowned Afro-Venezuelan activist and scholar Jesús "Chucho" García has said: "There is a great opening now; it's the moment for our recognition. That's what we are going to fight for."<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> "The Political Status of Afro-Venezuelans in the Bolivarian Revolution: A Democratic Measure for Venezuela and a Hemispheric Imperative," by James Early and Jesus "Chucho" Garcia, Olivia Burlingame Goumbri, ed., *The Venezuela Reader: The Building of a People's Democracy* (EPICA, 2005).

<sup>ii</sup> Jesús María Herrera Salas, "Ethnicity and Revolution: The Political Economy of Racism in Venezuela," *Latin American Perspectives* 32:2, March 2005.

<sup>iii</sup> "Chucho Garcia Interview: Race and Racial Divides in Venezuela," By Gregory Wilpert, *Venezuelanalysis*, Jan. 21, 2004. <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1091>

<sup>iv</sup> *Café con Leche: Race, Class, and the National Image in Venezuela*, Winthrop R. Wright (University of Texas Press, 1993).

<sup>v</sup> "Africa-Venezuela: Weaving New Alliances With Cultural Threads," By Humberto Márquez, *Inter Press Service*, Oct. 28, 2005. <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=30807>

<sup>vi</sup> "Venezuela: Afro-descendants Seek Visibility in Numbers," By Humberto Marquez, *Inter Press Service*, June 22, 2007. <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38278>

<sup>vii</sup> "Chucho Garcia Interview: Race and Racial Divides in Venezuela," By Gregory Wilpert, *Venezuelanalysis*, Jan. 21, 2004.