

REVOLUTION OF HOPE

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We hadn't been in Venezuela for more than three hours and we were already traversing the brilliantly spotless subway system in hope of catching a Sunday Presidential celebration. Earlier, we caught a red-eye flight from Atlanta to Caracas and hadn't had a wink of sleep.

No matter how long Chavez stands at the pulpit and talks about his political philosophy, his followers always seem to be asking for more.

The event itself was an eye opener for all. Pictures of Chavez and Che were everywhere. From t-shirts to posters, the icons of revolution were ever present. Hope with a "red" flare filled the damp air that day, as did a new brand of socialism. It would be hard for one to walk away from such an experience, where the poor and less fortunate had gathered to hail their leader, and not feel something profound. It was something extraordinary. The only thing that compared to this, were the antiwar protests leading up to the second Iraq invasion and the anti-WTO actions in Seattle. No matter what one may think about Chavez or his policies, there is no doubt that Venezuelans adore him.

We were fast waking up to something we hadn't felt before as we battled Bush day in and day out in North America: revolutionary hope, Bolivarian style. And we hadn't even had our first sips of Venezuelan coffee yet.

From there we traveled southwest by subway and bus to Caricuao with baseball aficionado Cesar Rengel, an activist and organizer with the Bolivarian Revolutionary group *Frente Francisco de Miranda*. Rengel was our guide and translator to the Missions, the hugely popular anti-poverty and social welfare programs instituted throughout the country by the Chavez government. We proceeded first to a modern full-service medical clinic, Clinica Popular Caricuao. The lines were long and doctors were extremely busy when we arrived, so we spoke to a patient waiting for service. Zulay, a raven-haired, middle-aged woman, dressed in a tank top with track pants and baby blue sneakers attested to the improvements in medical care under the administration of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. She said that the clinic was staffed with 60-70 doctors and provided medical care without charge for Venezuelans. To alleviate the waiting times, a new clinic is being erected nearby which will be staffed by Venezuelan and Cuban physicians. The Cuban doctors, we were told, are a temporary measure until Venezuela has enough of their own to staff the clinics.

Close by the medical clinic under construction is a government *mercal* (store), Mercado de Alimentos. Lisbeth I. Pineda is the administrative assistant at the merca with 13 employees. Pineda, sporting in a comfortable gray sweatshirt and jeans, is also pursuing a college degree at one of the Bolivarian universities, created by the Chavez government to do away with illiteracy and make education available for all, something people of impoverished background were previously unable to do. She proudly showed us her university ID card, all the while glowing with a smile that could melt steel. To us, that proud smile neatly symbolizes the sentiment of the Venezuelan masses: a sense of

pride that comes in benefiting from and contributing to something revolutionary and life-affirming.

The mercal opened two years ago to provide durable foodstuffs such as rice, beans, dried vegetables and cooking oils. Other mercals also have fresh vegetables and fruits. The products here were often labeled with revolutionary messages. Meat featured Argentinean beef and Brazilian chicken, at 15 percent of the retail cost to Venezuelans. Pineda mentioned that the retail capacity had recently been doubled due to the popularity of the store. The Chavez administration does not want Venezuela's food needs to be dependent on outside sources, so a concerted effort has been made to produce all foods locally.

Many such missions were dispersed throughout the region. Pineda averred, however, that the mercals, although in competition with local shops, had not affected small business appreciably.

Pineda led us downstairs to where low-cost pharmaceuticals were also sold. Dayana Rosario runs the pharmacy in this Mercal where she showed a variety of Venezuelan and imported drugs for assorted maladies, including contraception.

While strolling outside, Rengel said that the changes in Caricuao have been substantial: "In two years everything has changed." He pointed out how the low-cost housing has been and is being upgraded. The new coats of paint that have been applied to the high-rise complexes, which appear to have never been painted before, were very apparent.

Rengel brought us to an unassuming building where we ascended to the fifteenth floor apartment of a vivacious revolutionary matriarch, Nancy de Ramon. Her passion for the revolution and Chavez were readily apparent. She beamed as she displayed a Chavez photo set in a heart-shaped frame. She also showed a Christmas card adorning Chavez.

Like so many other Venezuelans we met, Nancy said the people were happier under Chavez government because significant changes were being made to their daily lives. She extolled the country's president. Chortled de Ramona, "Chavez has four balls. He has the balls of [turn-of-the-eighteenth-century revolutionary leader] Simón Bolívar's horse and his own balls."

When asked what she thought of George Bush's nut sack, she indicated clearly by the downward crushing motion of a clenched fist into the flat palm of the other hand.

On March 16 we visited the Casa de la Alimentación, a mission soup kitchen in Valencia, a town located 115 kilometers (71 miles) west of Caracas. The mission is housed in a modest brick structure with corrugated tin roof, the structure like its patrons, was weathered. It has been open since October 17, 2004 and is looked after by a stout woman with a red revolutionary ball-cap, Corina Torres. Torres explains how the mission, supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, provides two meals a day for homeless and needy people who cannot afford their own food. There is a weekly menu to ensure nutrition and variety for the clientele, which grows as the word of the mission spreads, according to Torres. The mission has a five person staff to run from 6am to 2pm every day. According to records shown to us by Torres, the soup kitchen provides about 85% of the basic daily caloric needs of the people it serves.

Torres sees Chávez as key to the entrenchment and expansion of the missions. "If Chavez is removed from power, the social improvements might end" fears Torres.

A man selling frozen treats in front of the mission was interested to share his thoughts in broken English. Gustavo Gottberg, who describes himself as a writer of mixed German-indigenous descent, is more optimistic about the social changes happening: "If Chávez [is] dead, there are too many people who have learned [about the revolution for it to end]."

Noting the enmity between the Venezuelan and US leadership, Gottberg states that Americans are "very good people." Leadership is a different matter, however. Venezuelans likely view George W. Bush similar to how Americans view Hugo Chávez, he says diplomatically.

The missions are prioritized to providing essential social services to Venezuelans. The clear impression from us all is that the missions are tangible evidence of the Chavez government's commitment to improve the lot of the Venezuelan masses. The missions do something more than look after the educational, medical, and nutritional needs of ordinary Venezuelans. The missions give the people hope for a better tomorrow.

Hope is what threatens US power. Hope is what drives the revolution forward.

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