

VIEWPOINT

Venezuela's present and future condition

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Special to the STAR

Caracas, September 20: I arrived in Venezuela burning with curiosity and concern, generated in part by my love for the country, my home during all of the 1970s, in part by my Cuba experience, where I was born, raised, lived all the revolutions from 1933 onward, then forced to flee, but also brought about by generally conflicting and confusing reports emanating from Caracas.

During my two week stay I questioned old friends, and some new ones, to draw out their views, hopes, predictions of things to come, the most probable course the new government will take, and most important of all, the final outcome of the exercise. Here is what I determined:

The 1999/2000 Revolution

Venezuela lived a genuine revolution during the past 18 months. Check the criteria: The old political system has been replaced by a totally new one. The Constitution of the Fourth Republic has been replaced with a new Constitution designed by members of the Fifth Republic. The country has a new name: Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela. Congress was disbanded. A Chamber of Deputies now handles parliamentary tasks. The judicial system, particularly the Supreme Court, was generally replaced. The upper echelon of all government ministries and enterprises have also been substituted. The above parameters more than fulfill base criteria for a revolution. The amazing part of this whole scenario is that all of the above was effected without a single shot fired. The revolution was totally peaceful.

Which is totally unheard of when analyzing not only the history of Venezuela but of its sister nations. President Hugo Chavez, the architect and driving force behind this revolution, now faces a monumental challenge: He must deliver.

Past and Present

Unabashed uncontrollable corruption within the public sector caused Venezuelans in general to search for a way to return their country to the straight and narrow. In the 1998 electoral process, Hugo Chavez, running on his own ticket and platform, easily won the hearts of the electorate with his promise to eliminate graft and return Venezuela to a greatness not seen in 30 years. When both the Copei and AD campaigns stagnated, Chavez won an overwhelming majority. Within days, the powerful political machine of AD and Copei vanished. Most of my friends, either AD or Copei, voted for Chavez, all sickened by the chaos their parties had created.

Politics

Many Venezuelans bemoan Chavez's engagement in the international arena but tradition proves that a new head of states domestic stature is greatly enhanced by quickly becoming an equal in the world arena. His well covered safari to OPEC nations has already yielded results prices near an all time high.

Fidel remains the fly in the ointment. His romancing of Chavez no doubt keeps petroleum flowing into Cuba graced with an unlimited credit line.

What I find scary: During Chavez's first year it was Fidel here, there and everywhere, doing this, that and the other together. During the past 5 months, mum's the word. I remain convinced Fidel drew up the Libretto that Chavez has followed to date. Fidel rues his past what with 99% of the country with him in 1959, he could have easily held elections. Once elected, he could have held a referendum on a new constitution. Under the new Cuban constitution, he could get reelected president for life. Who could call him a dictator? Chavez followed Fidel's wish-book to the end. Worrisome are Chavez's utterances: Do away with the rich and powerful, eliminate trade unions and consolidate workers into an organization he controls, tighten government controls over industry, the power to enact law.

Personal Safety

Terrible. More than ten years of corruption, the consequent breakdown of law and order, plus the effect of drug trade and its use, has created a deep rooted out-of-control criminal society. Kidnappings and muggings are rampant. Streets are generally unsafe. Traffic is still terrible, but the Metro works like a charm.

The Main Problem

Numbers tossed out by the government tend to indicate that more than 60% of the population exists at the poverty level. The poor have little or no access to medical care. With the bolivar edging towards 700 to the dollar, the squeeze will intensify. How to extricate the masses from decades of need, change their morality, educate and train them to hold productive jobs, jobs which must be generated, will sap all of the leaders' resources, energy and creativity.

The Future

Is in the hands of President Chavez. He has received the opportunity to rise to a level equal to that of Bolivar, if he can pull his act off he must discern his people's greatest needs, such as health care, education, housing and safety, and improve them quickly. He must maintain scrupulous control of finances. He must find hard working honest people to implement his programs. He must return fair play to the judicial system. With his absolute control of Parliament, he must lead towards fulfillment of his programs. For now, the Armed Forces are supportive.

Can he produce? Chavez preaches that decades of decadence cannot be turned around overnight. And he's right. But how long will he be given? Many are impatient, asking for results in 1 to 2 years. Most feel it will take all 6 years of his term to begin to turn the country around, if he can. Some feel Chavez is in for 12 years. Chavez is off to a good start. Schools opened with a monumental (2000% is the number tossed out) increase in enrollment. Medical care appears to be improving. The bottom line. I didn't find a single person who was totally convinced

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