

Why Chavez Won: An Inside View

Lisa Sullivan, October 8, 2012

A few days before the elections, a friend from the states wrote me: "Hi Lisa, all the main stream media down here has Chavez losing and ready to die. Can you give me a more accurate update on the elections?"

My inbox began to fill up with similar inquiries, many from people who I had met when leading delegations here to Venezuela, my home of 27 years. They were confused, wondering why Chavez was going to lose, die, or steal the elections, or all of the above. Those were, after all, the only stories to be found, countered by that of the great white hope in the form of a *young, skinny* opponent (the adjectives repeated ad nauseam by the media describe opposition candidate Capriles).

Where, my friends asked, was all that enthusiasm and spirit they had seen here, the one that had transformed this nation into the least unequal spot in all of Latin America, where free university education, health care and cheap food led to Venezuelans rating themselves as the happiest people on the continent? Had Venezuelans suddenly dropped the most significant political project in Latin America of the past 50 years to suddenly opt for skinniness and youth?

Even NPR set the stage for Venezuelan elections to a backdrop of doom and gloom, as friends notified me in a rush, listening to the Diane Rehm show. For busy and exhausted US citizens just trying to survive via the longest work hours on the planet, they only had time for small sound bites about Venezuela, or any global issue. And these sound bites painted a picture of Venezuela in shades of grey, kind of like those last tottering days of the Soviet empire. Into this scene, rides - or jogs - the youthful skinny Mr. Good to finally chase out the old (age 58) and solidly built Mr. Bad, according to Ms. Rehm and company.

How, then, then to explain yesterday's street scenes? The ones showing colorfully attired and jubilant Venezuelans standing patiently in huge lines at polling centers, sharing laughs and empanadas with fellow line-mates, indifferent of political loyalties. On the cameras, everyone looked so happy in those long lines, certainly that must mean that they were all voting against Chavez, that evil cancer-ridden old chunky socialist dictator.

But even worse, how to explain the RESULTS? How to explain how this cruel "strongman" had won robustly with more than 54% of the vote, 10% more than his opponent. Or, that there was a record 81% voter turnout? Well, it must befraud. That was the other scenario the mainstream media had constantly dangled. But wait, in a few minutes the opposition candidate was on televisions himself, accepting defeat, acknowledging the decision of the Venezuelan people and absolute legitimacy of the electoral system. Wasn't it only Jimmy Carter who was allowed an occasional sound bite that spoke positively about the Venezuelan electoral system (the very best of the dozens his Carter Center has monitored). Wait, this just isn't going as planned.

So, why? Well, without delving into the messy deep part of that question (think: Iraq and weapons of mass destruction), maybe let's just touch on some of the easier reasons. In spite of the fact that there were 12,000 journalists in Venezuela covering the elections last night, only a handful of them seemed to venture far from their 5-star hotels to take a look around the barrios and small rural towns where most Venezuelans actually *live*. Like I do. Perhaps if they poked around there for a half hour or so, they might discover what's behind all this love for this madman.

How about, for a start, free health care, and right in your local community? Well, if you don't believe those red-shirted socialist Venezuelans occasionally shown on tv pumping their fists at rallies, try listening to a *gringa*. A few weeks ago, I returned to Venezuela after a long set of travels interspersed with minor surgery. By the time my flight touched ground at the Maiquetia airport, my head was pounding and my vision blurring.

The next morning my *companero* Ledys took me to the local government health post, or, CDI, similar to those found in almost every Venezuelan community. As I stumbled in, the waters parted and soon I was on a gurney with young Cuban and Venezuelan doctors patiently asking me many questions and examining me. Realizing I was having a reaction to the pain medication that I took for the first time on the plane, I was sent home with new meds and a smile, never interchanging a single id or form of any payment. Within a few hours I was helping friends dig a vegetable garden. What a contrast to the series of medical appointments I had just undergone in the US, where the first words at a doctor's office were never "good morning" but, "your insurance card and id".

But the next day Ledys and I were back at the CDI, albeit in opposite roles. This time it was he with the pain, a raging one, in his lower right abdomen. Ledys was certain that the "socialist" arepas we had eaten the previous day had laid havoc to his gut, as he gulped several down, taking advantage of their rock bottom price. The doctors thought otherwise, especially after doing emergency lab work. The next thing I knew, the same social worker who had helped us the previous day was strolling him by wheelchair into an ambulance and sending me off with a kiss and assurance that we were in capable hands. Within minutes, we arrived at a four-story brand new building in the heart of Petare, one of the most populous and poorest sectors of the country, but I felt that I was back in Washington, in a state-of-the-art hospital.

But no, this was definitely Venezuela, as I discerned when no id was requested, the only information requested being name and age of patient. By late evening, orderlies called me to the hospital ward where I found Ledys looking happy and pain free after three hours of surgery to rid him of his appendix and hernia (they threw in the second surgery since he was already opened up.) Two days later we were sent home, with meds and follow up instruction. Total bill: \$0.

If free health care isn't enough reason to explain Venezuela's election results, maybe you can look to the faces of the young people who were jumping up and down last night in front of the presidential palace. For some odd reason, they just didn't buy the charm of that young skinny candidate, in spite of the fact that he even wore his lucky shoes yesterday (the press just loved that touch). Maybe the reason for their unadulterated joy was the lack of two words in their vocabulary: *student loans*.

I found that out when recently I hosted a dialogue between university students from the US and Venezuela at a cultural center that Ledys and I started in the sprawling barrios of Barquisimeto. When I saw the quizzical look on the faces of the Venezuelans as I attempted to translate the term *student loans* - which the US students were explaining were their main stumbling block to a hopeful future - I realized it wasn't a question of translation, but of opposing realities. When we began to build this center twenty years ago, we only had two young at the center who had made it to college. Now, among this group of 15 Venezuelan musicians, all between ages 17-20, and all hailing from these barrios, every single one of them was studying at the university. Tuition was free and some even had scholarships to cover food and transportation. Student loans?

As Ledys and I anxiously awaited the results last night I was getting text messages from my comadre Erika, a young mother of six, and my neighbor. Erika treats every recent election (and there have been many of them, over 10 in the past decade or so) as a matter of life and death, waiting anxiously with heart-in-hand outside the one polling station in our little town of Palo Verde, the one school building there. When I arrived in this community 15 years ago, the school was just a grade school. In the past ten years, it has doubled in size, and now also functions as a high school by day, on weekends as a free government university, and evenings, as one of the tens of thousands of "mission" schools, run by the government.

Erika grew up having to pick coffee instead of going to school. Three years ago she got her grade school degree from the mission school, and is now well on her way to a high school degree. She is thinking of what to study at the university level, maybe social work. She often repeats to me: "comadre, notice how Chavez always says, *WE* the poor. He is one of us".

Erika lives in a hand fashioned home of bahareque (wattle and daub) like mine, snuggled in a small community at the end of the town. More than half of the thirty or so homes in our neighborhood are brand new, sporting the before unheard-of *indoor* bathrooms and kitchens, all tiled in a lovely sea green. Erika was part of the community council that helped with the census that determined which families most needed the new homes (mostly, those that squished several nuclear families together under one roof). Others had more need as she acknowledged, so she helped with the process, but remained with her old home.

Funds for 16 homes were dispersed by the government, but the community council managed the funds well enough to build 17 homes. The instant that the election results were announced Erika called me with joy and tears in her voice: "comadre, we won!".

I confess, I also felt tears stream down my face. I was holding my computer to the television screen so that my daughter back in Virginia could see the results via skype at the moment they were announced. Her tears joined mine. She remembers all too well growing up in the pre-Bolivarian Venezuela. The one where her friends in the barrio could barely scrape enough to eat, where some had parents who died of lack of health care, where none ever dreamed of going to college. That's the Venezuela before, the one that the mainstream press never bothers to mention, the Venezuela that led Latin America for the deepest plunge into poverty in the 15 years preceding Chavez. The Venezuela directed by the IMF and World Bank, two of the main buddies the lucky-shoed candidate promised to usher in again.

After the results, the television screens turned to the scene outside the presidential palace. Did the US mainstream press bother to show that scene? It was utterly electric. Seas of red-shirted Venezuelans had been waiting for hours for results, and now the moment was theirs as Chavez stepped out onto “the balcony of the people”. As crowd and president intoned the national anthem together the look of sheer joy on the faces of so many Venezuelans, a nation that saw my children grow and flourish and learn to become caring people in love with justice, I let my own tears flow.

“Chavez is the people” is the phrase heard over and over here. To those back in the states, how could you possibly understand, there is no real coverage of what happens in Venezuela in the mainstream media. But to watch that scene, that utter connection, you would also sense that each of these people felt that who they are was being uplifted at that moment : their absolute dignity, their unalienable right to healthcare, education, housing, food and above all, a sense that they have the power to determine the direction of their own country All of this was lifted as high as the stars last night.

The electricity built as Chavez held high above the crowd the sword of Simon Bolivar. The one mismatch for me and Chavez has always been his military persona, and as a life-time peace activist, the image of a sword isn't exactly what does it for me, even one gleaming like this in gold and diamonds. But the chant of the crowd as he raised the sword is one that I have heard over and over again in my recent travels to the length and breadth of this Latin America, a continent that I have lived in and loved for the past 35 years: “alerta, alerta, alerta que camina, la espada de Bolivar por America Latina” (Alert: The sword of Bolivar is walking throughout Latin America.)

As Chavez held up the sword, he and the crowd swayed as they spoke and cheered that real independence was finally coming to Latin America, a continent increasingly configuring itself as one: UNASUR, ALBA, CELAC, all variations of Bolivar's dream. The independence that Bolivar won from Spain, via a sword, was now being won again, from a colonizer that took over no sooner than Spaniards had departed: my country.

But this time the sword was indicative of a new form of battle: democracy. The massive enthusiastic and peaceful turnout at Venezuelan polls yesterday is the real story of Venezuelan elections. The fact that deep social change is happening in Venezuela and throughout Latin America, via a ballot box and not bullets, is what I celebrate.

In my travels as Latin America coordinator for the School of the Americas Watch, I have heard too many stories of atrocities, murders, rapes, disappearances, torture at the hands of dictators that we in the US trained and supported. And I don't just mean in the 60's and 70's. I mean in the 2010's, like in Honduras, where human rights leaders, peasants and journalists are being murdered right now, today, because of our support for an illegal coup to unseat a president who dared to invite his population to dream the dreams of dignity that flowed in the streets last night, the dreams of Morazan, Central America's Bolivar.

One final note. There are actually lots of journalists who do take the time to seek out and write about the real story. They are not to be found in the mainstream press, but they can be found in organizations such as CEPR, the Real News, Venezuelanalysis, the Americas Program, Upside Down World, and many many more. My saludos to them

this morning, how we need you and thank you for rolling up your sleeves, with meager or no budgets, and working late into the night to report the truth. From Venezuela, from the heart of the Bolivarian dream for Latin America, gracias!

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Abrazos, Lisa

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