

# Venezuela: A brief history



**V S C**  
British Venezuela  
Solidarity Campaign

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**By: Carlos Herrera - Bolivarian Activist**

Since the election of Hugo Chavez to the presidency of Venezuela in 1998, Venezuela has not only been going through a period of social and economic change.

It has also been wracked by a political conflict which culminated in the April 2002 coup d'état, followed by a lock out and sabotage of its oil industry in the 63 day "general strike" (Bosses lock-out) from December 2002 to February 2003.

This cost the country around US\$22 billion in lost oil and industrial production. In both cases, the objective of the US inspired opposition, who were losing their economic privileges, was to overthrow the democratically elected government of Hugo Chavez with the ultimate aim of abolishing the Bolivarian Constitution, approved in a national referendum on December 15th 1999 by 71% of the voters.

Since independence was finally wrested from the grips of the Spanish Empire at the Battle of Carabobo on June 24th 1821, Venezuela has experienced a series of civil wars such as the Federation War (1859 -1863) for control of the land, or was peppered by successive coups right up to 1948. Dictatorships were commonplace such as the brutal control Jose Vicente Gomez (1908 - 1935) or Marcos Perez Jimenez (1952 – 1959). Democracy was finally established in 1961 but the elected president, Romulo Betancourt, suspended all civil and economic

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guarantees upon promulgating the constitution of that year, which effectively pledged allegiance to the US. This was a sign of what was to come.

From 1961 – 1998, more than 10,000 Venezuelans were either assassinated or "disappeared" in the name of "democracy". No government was accused of human rights abuses. The result was a guerilla war from 1962 – 1973, inspired by the Cuban Revolution, until the "pacification" of that year. This Venezuelan model of "controlling" the population and countering the perceived communist threat set the model for the dirty war of the brutal fascist dictatorships of the Southern Cone in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay in the 1970's.

Venezuela sits on a sea of oil. It has been exporting to the US for a century and most of the roads in the US are paved with Venezuelan asphalt. The nationalisation of the oil industry in 1976 and the Arab Oil Embargo pumped billions of dollars into the economy.

However, this oil wealth never reached the common people and was siphoned off by the oil industry technocrats with the connivance of the multinationals. As of now, rich corrupt Venezuelans hold up to US\$200 billion in offshore accounts. From 1973 to 2001, the population doubled, poverty increased and in February 1989, President Carlos Andres Perez implemented a neoliberal economic package dreamed up by the IMF. The poor rebelled on February 27th of that year as many prices were doubled, and the response was to slaughter up to 3000 people in the streets using the police and the army. The stage was now set for Hugo Chavez.

**After two unsuccessful military rebellions in February and November 1992**, in response to the killings of 1989, Hugo Chavez was imprisoned and was finally pardoned in March 1994, as his popularity had grown while he was in jail. Upon release, he traveled the whole country drumming up support amongst the poor and excluded and finally won the presidency of Venezuela in 1998.

### **The Bolivarian revolution**

Using the 1999 Constitution as his main “weapon”, Chavez christened the changes taking place in the country The Bolivarian Revolution, named after the Liberator of six South American countries, Simon Bolivar. The cornerstones are “social justice”, equality and bringing the historically excluded and downtrodden into society. This is being accomplished by the social “Missions”, funded by oil revenues, and civic-military cooperation, backed up by the concept of “participative democracy” as

opposed to “representative democracy”.

In “**participative democracy**”, the people have a say in decisions being taken and have the right to revoke ANY elected official half way through their mandate. Since 1998, Chavez has been to the polls in either elections or referendums 9 times, and has wiped the floor with the right wing opposition each time. He must be the world’s leading democrat!

The documentary, “The Revolution will not be televised” (see website) is the inside story of the April 2002 coup d’état. Draw your own conclusions. Millions of people countrywide took to the streets and restored the constitutional order in 48 hours, as well as saving Chavez from being executed, which would have triggered a bloody civil war, without any shadow of a doubt.

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**Bolivarian grass roots activist Carlos Herrera** works with the local population with the aim of organising direct action groups to develop projects that will benefit the communities. An additional objective is to bring home the message of popular, participative democracy as enshrined in the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999. These activities germinate into meetings and forums designed to make the average citizen more conscious of his rights, duties and role in contemporary Venezuelan society. In recent years he has traveled extensively in Latin America and has the aim of informing the English speaking world about political and social movements in this most unequal of all continents. This is now even more vital as the historical struggle for real independence and self-determination gathers pace against the hegemonic pretensions of US imperialism, and the unbridled greed of the global corporate empire.