

Why Venezuela has voted again for Chavez

By Greg Palast
gregpalast.com | August 16, 2004

There's so much BS and baloney thrown around about Venezuela that I may be violating some rule of US journalism by providing some facts. Let's begin with this: 77% of Venezuela's farmland is owned by 3% of the population, the 'hacendados.'

I met one of these farmlords in Caracas at an anti-Chavez protest march. Oddest demonstration I've ever seen: frosted blondes in high heels clutching designer bags, screeching, 'Chavez – dic-ta-dor!' The plantation owner griped about the 'socialismo' of Chavez, then jumped into his Jaguar convertible.

That week, Chavez himself handed me a copy of the 'socialist' manifesto that so rattled the man in the Jag. It was a new law passed by Venezuela's Congress which gave land to the landless. The Chavez law transferred only fields from the giant haciendas which had been left unused and abandoned. This land reform, by the way, was promoted to Venezuela in the 1960s by that Lefty radical, John F. Kennedy. Venezuela's dictator of the time agreed to hand out land, but forgot to give peasants title to their property.

But Chavez won't forget, because the mirror reminds him. What the affable president sees in his reflection, beyond the ribbons of office, is a 'negro e indio' – a 'Black and Indian' man, dark as a cola nut, same as the landless and, until now, the hopeless. For the first time in Venezuela's history, the 80% Black-Indian population elected a man with skin darker than the man in the Jaguar.

So why, with a huge majority of the electorate behind him, twice in elections and today in a referendum, is Hugo Chavez in hot water with our democracy-promoting White House?

Maybe it's the oil. Lots of it. Chavez sits atop a reserve of crude that rivals Iraq's. And it's not his presidency of Venezuela that drives the White House bananas, it was his presidency of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC. While in control of the OPEC secretariat, Chavez cut a deal with our maximum leader of the time, Bill Clinton, on the price of oil. It was a 'Goldilocks' plan. The price would not be too low, not too high; just

Why Venezuela has voted again for Chavez / 2

right, kept between \$20 and \$30 a barrel.

But Dick Cheney does not like Clinton nor Chavez nor their band. To him, the oil industry's (and Saudi Arabia's) freedom to set oil prices is as sacred as freedom of speech is to the ACLU. I got this info, by the way, from three top oil industry lobbyists.

Why should Chavez worry about what Dick thinks? Because, said one of the oil men, the Veep in his bunker, not the pretzel-chewer in the White House, 'runs energy policy in the United States.'

And what seems to have gotten our Veep's knickers in a twist is not the price of oil, but who keeps the loot from the current band-busting spurt in prices. Chavez had his Congress pass another oil law, the 'Law of Hydrocarbons,' which changes the split. Right now, the oil majors – like PhillipsConoco – keep 84% of the proceeds of the sale of Venezuela oil; the nation gets only 16%.

Chavez wanted to double his Treasury's take to 30%. And for good reason. Landless, hungry peasants have, over decades, drifted into Caracas and other cities, building million-person ghettos of cardboard shacks and open sewers. Chavez promised to do something about that. And he did. 'Chavez gives them bread and bricks,' one Venezuelan TV reporter told me. The blonde TV newscaster, in the middle of a publicity shoot, said the words 'pan y ladrillos' with disdain, making it clear that she never touched bricks and certainly never waited in a bread line.

But to feed and house the darker folk in those bread and brick lines, Chavez would need funds, and the 16% slice of the oil pie wouldn't do it. So the President of Venezuela demanded 30%, leaving Big Oil only 70%. Suddenly, Bill Clinton's ally in Caracas became Mr. Cheney's – and therefore, Mr. Bush's – enemy.

So began the Bush-Cheney campaign to 'Floridate' the will of the Venezuela electorate. It didn't matter that Chavez had twice won election. Winning most of the votes, said a White House spokesman, did not make Chavez' government 'legitimate.' Hmmm. Secret contracts were awarded by our Homeland Security spooks to steal official Venezuela voter lists. Cash passed discreetly from the US taxpayer, via the so-called 'Endowment for Democracy,' to the Chavez-haters running today's 'recall' election.

A brilliant campaign of placing stories about Chavez' supposed unpopularity and 'dictatorial' manner seized US news and op-ed pages, ranging from the San Francisco Chronicle to the New York Times.

But some facts just can't be smothered in propaganda ink. While George Bush can appoint the government of Iraq and call it 'sovereign,' the government of Venezuela is appointed by its people. And the fact is that most people in this slum-choked land don't drive Jaguars or have their hair tinted in Miami. Most look in the mirror and see someone

Why Venezuela has voted again for Chavez / 3

‘negro e indio,’ as dark as their President Hugo.

The official CIA handbook on Venezuela says that half the nation’s farmers own only 1% of the land. They are the lucky ones, as more peasants owned nothing. That is, until their man Chavez took office. Even under Chavez, land redistribution remains more a promise than an accomplishment. But today, the landless and homeless voted their hopes, knowing that their man may not, against the armed axis of local oligarchs and Dick Cheney, succeed for them. But they are convinced he will never forget them.

And that’s a fact.

Greg Palast’s reports from Venezuela for BBC Television’s Newsnight and the Guardian papers of Britain earned a California State University Journalism School ‘Project Censored’ award for 2002. View photos and Palast’s reports on Venezuela at www.GregPalast.com.