



David Wearing looks at a new film that casts Venezuela's 'Bolívarian revolution' as a genuine grassroots movement, rather than the Chavez-led personality cult that some would have you believe.

What is the nature of the political change that has been taking shape in Venezuela since the election of President Hugo Chavez in 1998? This has become one of the central questions in world politics over the past decade. Why? Because events in that South American country have direct relevance to the key global trends of the moment: the waning power of the United States, the fading credibility of the neo-liberal economic model, and the slow replacement of the zombified 'Washington Consensus'.

Inside the Revolution, a film by the documentary-maker Pablo Navarrete, is a serious, insightful and thought-provoking review of Venezuelan politics over recent years. With a particular focus on the perspectives of the poorest and an admirable willingness to let them tell their own story, Navarrete analyses the roots of the transformation taking place in Venezuela, the obstacles it faces, and the prospects for the future.

Venezuela is often portrayed as the plaything of a whimsical, loudmouth caudillo: Chavez. In interviews with community organisers and activists in the slums of Caracas, and with academics in Venezuela's universities, Navarrete uncovers an altogether less superficial narrative. The 'Bolivarian revolution' - named after the 19th century South American independence leader Simón Bolívar - is the product of the socio-economic conditions of the country and the popular political movements that these conditions have given rise to. These movements pre-date Chavez, are likely to persist long after he has departed the scene, and would probably have had a serious impact on the country whether or not he had ever entered politics himself.

Venezuela, like much of Latin America, is largely the product of 500 years of imperial history, and nowhere is this better reflected than in its vast disparities in wealth and political power. The elites living at the comfortable end of the scale are often descended from European settlers of the colonial era, just as the poor majority is largely descended from their slaves, subjects and the remnants of the indigenous population. The tensions of modern Latin American politics emanate from within this historic social divide.

Venezuela's standard of living fell dramatically after the oil boom of the 1970s, and in 1989 the International Monetary Fund (the imperial wing of the US Treasury) imposed draconian price increases to be borne disproportionately by the poorer classes. This provoked a spontaneous popular uprising which was savagely suppressed by the authorities, with thousands killed. Anger at these events fed into a broader, growing disillusionment with the elite-dominated two-party system. It was in these circumstances that, in 1998, Chavez swept the discredited political establishment aside, winning the presidential election with 56 per cent of the vote.

As one political activist observes in a meeting captured in the film: "This process does not belong to Chavez, it belongs to the Venezuelan people. The people came out in 1989 to demand change when Chavez was still unknown." It is the dedication of the politically mobilised Venezuelan poor, and the support of almost two-thirds of voters, that goes a long way toward

explaining the persistence of 'Bolívarianism' over ten years of sometimes bitter struggle. More than this, it is their role not merely as the supporting cast but as protagonists that has arguably done far more than the individual actions of Chavez to shape their national story. This is a key point emphasised by Navarrete's film – probably its most important contribution.

As the film makes clear, it was the overwhelming opposition of the people - expressed in massive public demonstrations - that faced down and defeated the US-backed coup against Chavez in 2002. When, after the coup failed, a management lock-out in the oil industry threatened to bring the Venezuelan economy to its knees (echoing US President Richard Nixon's order to "make the economy scream" in Chile prior to the 1973 coup there), it was the dedication of Chavez's supporters which thwarted this attempt to make the country ungovernable. The opposition's third failed attempt to get rid of Chavez was at least democratic; a constitutional referendum to remove him from office being voted down by 59 per cent of the electorate.

The strength of the government's support is not hard to understand. Recent [research](#) shows that a doubling in social spending since since the oil industry lock-out of 2003 has had dramatic effects on social welfare. Poverty has been cut in half and extreme poverty by 70 percent. Access to healthcare and education has expanded, while wealth inequality and unemployment have shrunk. Beyond this, political and economic power has also been redistributed. Unused agricultural land, the vast majority owned by a tiny economic elite, has been handed over to cooperatives of local people to use for the benefit of their communities. Twenty thousand communal councils have been created to allow democratic control of public services and amenities at a very local level.

Perhaps the most telling act of the short-lived junta of 2002 was the abolition of the new 'Bolívarian' constitution, which had been drawn up in popular consultations and ratified with 72 per cent of the vote in a national referendum in 1999. This enshrined an extension and

devolution of rights to the citizenry (for example, by introducing the recall referendums for public officials mentioned above). As the Venezuelan academics interviewed for the film explain, these measures are an expression of the Chavez government's explicit desire to differentiate their form of socialism from the failures of the bureaucratic, centralised Soviet system. What is sought instead is a democratic model grown naturally from the realities of today's Venezuela. Given the current crisis in the Western 'free-market' system, this critical analysis of a developing world country's attempt to construct an alternative social model is one of the most valuable parts of the film.

Navarrete presents an analytical and not-uncritical look at the Chavez administration, for instance in noting the continuing failure to tackle corruption and food shortages, and the authoritarian streak displayed by a few of the government's supporters. Another aspect worthy of attention might have been Chavez's willingness to ally himself with global opponents of Washington even where their values and politics are every bit as warped as those of George W Bush. The international aspect in general is passed over lightly, including the fact that Venezuela is one of several Latin American governments, from Brazil to Ecuador, that are in their own way rejecting the Washington Consensus and charting a new path of independence. The documentary is not lengthy at 65 minutes, and the few moments that cover regional integration, including Chavez's remarks on the global financial crisis, could perhaps have been expanded slightly to talk more about Venezuela's role in the world.

These, however, are minor quibbles. The decision to make the Venezuelan people the protagonists in this telling of their recent history is the unique strength of this documentary. Navarrete and his team have produced an important work of reportage and analysis, and one hopes it will gain the wide audience it deserves.

For more information on screenings of Inside the Revolution, visit www.alborada.net.

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