



**REPORT OF THE SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL MISSION
TO VENEZUELA**

20-23 JANUARY 2010

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A Mission of the Socialist International visited Caracas on 20-23 January 2010, headed by its Secretary General Luis Ayala, and composed of Peggy Cabral (PRD, Dominican Republic), Renée Fregosi (PS, France), Paulina Lampsas (PASOK, Greece), Emilio Menéndez del Valle (PSOE, Spain) and Jesús Rodríguez (UCR, Argentina).

The members of the Mission held a series of meetings with:

- SI member parties and parties close to the organisation: AD, MAS, PODEMOS and UNT;
- All of the member parties of the *Mesa de Unidad Democrática*: the aforementioned group plus ABP, COPEI and *Primero Justicia*;
- Representatives of the Catholic Church: Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino, Archbishop of Caracas, and other members of the Episcopal Conference;
- The Rector of the Central University of Venezuela, Cecilia García Arocha;
- Students' organisations of the Central University of Venezuela;
- The leaders of the CTV and FUT trades unions, and of the SNTP and FIP press unions;
- Entrepreneurs and leaders of the employers' organisation FEDECAMARA;
- Personalities of the left, amongst them Teodoro Petkoff and other intellectuals;
- Representatives of the mainstream media (newspapers *El Nacional*, *El Universal* and *Ultimas Noticias*, and of some private radio and television stations), including *Globovisión*;
- Representatives of organisations for the defence of Human Rights and relatives of political prisoners;
- Representatives of the ONG platform *Alianza para la Democracia*;
- The international reflection group of the *Mesa de Unidad Democrática*.

The Mission gave a press conference which attracted great media attention, in particular from the written press. The members of the Mission were observers to the two demonstrations which took place on Saturday 23 January in commemoration of the 52nd anniversary of the fall of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez: on the one hand an opposition protest and on the other a demonstration of the ruling

party. Additionally, the members of the Mission held individual private talks with Venezuelan contacts and with diplomats and foreign residents. Despite requests made in preparation to the Mission and later reiterated throughout the stay, it was regrettably impossible to meet with representatives of the ruling PSUV party and with the presidential majority in the National Assembly.

Following the meetings, interviews and conversations held with the different national political and social actors, the Mission made a collective reflection (regularly punctuated by working sessions exclusively between the members of the Mission), showing a deep community spirit and a noteworthy convergence of opinion. In this way, an agreement was quickly reached with regard to the firm but independent position the Mission should maintain towards public representatives.

The SI was present to observe and listen to the actors of Venezuelan public life in order to formulate its own opinion of the situation regarding democracy in the country. It did not in any way seek to make a judgement *a priori* about the government of President Chávez, nor did it seek to enter into polemics and the polarised atmosphere of local political life. All this was done whilst reaffirming at the same time the values of the SI and our definition of democratic socialism: representative democracy, free and fair elections, the search for social consensus, respect for political opposition and minorities, guaranteed freedom of expression and of all public and individual freedoms upon which modern democracy is founded, social justice, the regulation of states and international solidarity. To a large extent, the press reported the presence and declarations of the Mission with great rigour.

In all of his declarations, the spokesperson of the Mission, Luis Ayala expressed his hope and optimism to see Venezuela once again find the path of social peace thanks to strong citizen participation in the next legislative elections of September 2010.

For these legislative elections, the opposition has announced the presentation of single candidates in each constituency whose names will be made public in April. The subject of the forthcoming election was one of the main themes of the Mission, highlighting the search for agreement between political actors and the necessity of a strong system of electoral control and observation, but also a concern with regard to boundary changes made to the detriment of the opposition, and in addition, the possibility of new measures which could obstruct the free expression of citizens.

In effect, the appropriation of the legislative framework is a key tool in the governmental practice to ensure its own perpetuity in power. In every area of his direct interventions, President Chávez looks for ways to legalise his actions; new laws are promulgated by a Parliament with an overwhelming majority. In this way, expropriation procedures (businesses, banks, means of communication, property), the creation of new administrative entities (at ministerial, provincial and municipal level), representative entities (trade unions, employers' organisations and students' organisations) and citizen entities (neighbourhood, enterprise and public administration committees) are legalised, as well as new measures in electoral, judicial and administrative matters. Some of these new laws contravene the

Constitution approved by the National Assembly, where the ruling party has an absolute majority.

This way of legally imposing the will of President Chávez was highlighted by all the interlocutors during the Mission. Another notable fact was the consensus amongst remarks made by different social actors heard by the Mission: the feared instruments of an authoritarian mechanism of a new type, of a modern *democradura* (a government of democratic origin which is in reality authoritarian), were described in a recurring and convergent manner throughout the meetings and interviews carried out by the members of the Mission. Expressions such as “authoritarian routine”, “criminalisation of dissent”, “revolutionary constitutionalism”, “insecurity and impunity” and “terror and corruption” reappear frequently in the statements.

Within the systematic splitting of administrative and social structures, the authorities tolerate certain areas of freedom, reduced in number and reach, and above all limited to sectors that do not affect the public at large, the popular masses, or the poorest sectors of society. In this way, the written press, which is essentially targeted at intellectuals and a limited section of the middle class, shows an astonishing freedom of expression, in spite of being closely monitored and always threatened with disruption of its paper supply, the distribution of which has been appropriated by the government (along with a whole series of strategic products and services, such as oil, electricity, steel, construction, agro-industry, telecommunications and the banking sector).

Whilst the activities of civil society and the political opposition are not formally banned, they are controlled and limited, in particular as the result of a form of self-censorship that exists under the permanent threat of verbal attacks from the President and representatives of the authorities, and physical attacks from paramilitary groups. Some of these groups are plainly under orders from the authorities, whilst others outflank the President ‘on his left’ and are beyond his immediate control. The violence to which the Central University of Venezuela and other universities are regularly subjected whilst attempting to uphold both their mission to provide high-level professional education and a spirit of critical thought amongst younger generations, are in this respect representative of the climate of insecurity and fear which reigns in the country.

As expressed in a manual for workers’ education published by an official trade union, “violence is the means for the implementation of modern societies (according to Marx)”. Violence, threats, intimidation, insecurity, uncertainty and instability of laws and procedures constitute the current framework of society. This has consequences not only for the private lives of the people and for civil and political life, but equally for national economic activity.

The result is that, in effect, an arbitrary and often incompetent centralised management has had disastrous results on an economic level, with serious social repercussions, in particular for the poorest individuals. Venezuela’s inflation rate of 30% in 2009 was the highest on the continent; at 15% of GDP, production of

manufactured goods is constantly falling; since the end of 2008, the country is in a deepening recession; the industrial sector has lost 36% of its companies, with a corresponding reduction in jobs; oil revenues largely fund imports and overseas capital investment. Finally, the last devaluation has halved the value of Venezuelans' savings and income.

As far as the overall running of the country is concerned, the lack of coordination and the prevalence of confrontational logic are regrettable in all sectors of society. In addition, on an international level, the policy of confrontation towards neighbouring Colombia on one hand, and the importation of the Middle East conflict on the other, represent serious risks to regional stability and a threat to peace.

Finally, many speakers recalled the responsibilities and failures of the previous system which opened the way to the current situation.

Faced with this reality, the Socialist International and its member parties have an inescapable duty of solidarity with the political and social left of Venezuela.
