

siderable political space in which social movements like the MST can maneuver.

As they engage in grassroots organization and massive local and national mobilizations, the MST and social movements elsewhere have challenged the patterns of policymaking in Brazil and many other Latin American countries. Their growth and militancy have generated a whole new repertoire of actions that include national mobilizations so massive that they can topple governments—as in Bolivia—or force them to change their policies. They have left the traditional parties far behind as they forge new political horizons and create a non-authoritarian, participatory political culture. Such movements are using existing political space to maxi-

mum effect. In the process they are substantially strengthening participatory democratic practice.

They have vigorously resisted the corporate-led economic globalization process that has been heralded as the panacea to underdevelopment and poverty. Indeed, the economic realities that the masses of people all over Latin America are living, provide a potent empirical antidote to the universal prescription to globalize. The formulation of highly political social movements and the participatory democracy they practice provide a new and promising response to global neoliberalism. Further, these responses represent a substantial change from previous forms of political action, and they are transforming the conduct of politics in Brazil and Latin America. ■

Chavistas in the Halls of Power, Chavistas on the Street

by Jonah Gindin

WITH MEMBERS OF VENEZUELA'S political opposition trying to get rid of President Hugo Chávez by just about any means they can think of, Chávez's supporters have been in a near-constant state of anti-opposition mobilization. The implementation of projects aimed at improving the lives of poor Venezuelans has frequently taken a back seat to this defensive mobilization. But the mobilization itself has created a social momentum that may be carrying Chavismo—the loose grouping of Chávez's supporters—toward a deepening of his proclaimed "Bolivarian Revolution."

What distinguishes Chavismo from other political movements is the space Chávez's leadership has opened for mobilization from below. With his charisma and masterful ability to engage in political dialogue with the

estimated 80% of Venezuelans who live below the poverty line, Chávez has united most of the country's anti-neoliberal forces under his leadership.

The pro-Chávez mobilization has taken two principal forms. The first follows from the government's active creation of participatory community organizations, neighborhood associations and public-works projects.¹ Health committees, for example, work with Cuban doctors and provide a link between the community and the state in Barrio Adentro, a program offering free primary health care in poor neighborhoods. And land committees oversee and participate in the application of urban and rural land reform.

In this political context, the first steps toward the development of participatory budgeting has meant the creation of "commu-

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nity living organizations,” each made up of roughly 15 to 30 people, one member of each family in a given neighborhood. The unique character of these organizations is that they act not only as organizing conduits, but also as informal centers of evaluation and criticism. When land reform is not proceeding according to schedule, for example, or community health clinics are not receiving their funding, it is the committee members of the communities in question who bring the issue to the attention of the state—by direct protest when necessary.

Chávez. The 2001 coup and four ultimately unsuccessful, though destructive, general strikes and employer lockouts have inevitably put the government, and its supporters, on the defensive. The resulting siege mentality, particularly as a result of the coup, has meant that the organization of a huge swath of Venezuelan society has been specifically predicated on the basis of supporting the President.

THE POWERFUL CULT OF PERSONALITY SURROUNDING Chávez gave him a resounding victory in last August’s presidential recall referendum, and was largely responsible for the government’s landslide victory in the October regional elections. But this type of support inevitably discourages the development of an autonomous, popular movement capable of making independent decisions when the need arises.

The student movement still exists, as do recently revitalized progressive trade union movements. Recently created community organizations are complimented by a slightly older variety of small, disparate community-based social movements. Yet, as veteran social activist and writer Roland Denis notes, “These are groups that move within a large wave of rebellion, but without an organic base, without a party, without history, without tradition; groups that must practically invent a movement from scratch. They are movements that are basically sustained by grassroots leaders, community leaders, student leaders, trade union leaders, peasant leaders—fundamentally popular leaders.”³

The fragmented social movements that predate Chávez have not abandoned their existing structures. But now, community-based activism inevitably involves close coordination with government-formed community organizations, blurring the boundaries between the two. Chavismo’s linkage to a representative national



Chávez holding a pocket-size copy of Venezuela’s Constitution.

“Local leadership exists, regional leadership exists; there exists a new emerging leadership within *el proceso*,” notes Pedro Infante, director of the National Coordinator of Popular Organizations. “We are organized, but we are dispersed.”² Government mobilizing is in part responding to this reality. It is a form of mobilization that is both intentional and unselfish in that it is usually separate from political campaigns or the direct promotion of Chávez. Its clear goal has been to lay the foundation upon which to build participatory power structures in poor communities, where organized political capacities have atrophied after decades of exclusion.

The second form of mobilization is a natural byproduct of representative democracy, but also a direct reaction to the legal and illegal campaign to overthrow

political body makes it a stunningly large and complex mobilizing force.

In the two months between the announcement of the August 15 recall referendum and the referendum vote itself, the government organized its supporters into a nationwide social movement-cum-political party of a kind never before seen in the country, or the region, in either structure or scale. In the first speech of the campaign on June 5, Chávez announced the creation of “electoral battle units” (UBEs) and electoral “patrols” to be coordinated by a national committee. The Comando Maisanta, as the committee was called, oversaw UBEs in every state, municipality and neighborhood, and reported directly to the President. Every Venezuelan who did not want to see Chávez removed from office was encouraged to organize him or herself into a patrol of ten committed activists. Groups of patrols made up district UBEs, which together made up municipal UBEs and so on.

At most levels, time constraints made a democratic structure impossible. Chávez appointed the members of the Comando Maisanta and the state-level UBEs, but from the level of the municipality to the community, positions were largely submitted to improvised elections. Almost overnight, an estimated 1.2 million militants had joined the campaign, creating patrols and UBEs in every neighborhood in the country. Nearly 4% of Venezuela’s population became active members of UBEs. Certainly, many who joined the UBEs were from land- and health-reform committees, and some were activists in community-living organizations and militants of the community-based social movements. But for a large majority of UBE members, this was their first experience in political activism.

In a recent interview in Caracas, Pakistani social activist and writer Tariq Ali noted that Venezuela presents an important example of how political and social movements can work together. “The Bolivarian movement,” he commented, “is both a social movement that mobilizes the poor as nothing else has been able to do in this country, and a political movement, because it finds its reflection in the government, which it continues to reelect.”⁴

The development of a new kind of social movement in Venezuela is one of the Bolivarian Revolution’s most important legacies. Through conscious, planned community mobilization and concrete advances in key areas of education, health and housing, Chavismo is currently acting in many capacities as a traditional social movement. But its organic link to the state gives it a character and a revolutionary potential lacking in other movements of

the region such as Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST) or the Argentine *piqueteros*. Chavismo’s lack of autonomy from government is certainly problematic, and it is a contradiction that will eventually be unsustainable. But the manner in which this contradiction forces its own resolution need not be negative.

As the backbone of the Bolivarian project, Chavismo already has the space necessary to exert intense pressure on the government to deepen the embryonic development of participatory power structures such as Local Planning Councils and the UBEs. It can do this to such an extent that autonomy becomes irrelevant, or even undesirable: Chavismo as a social movement and as a government may eventually more solidly converge.

Another fundamentally important product of Chavismo’s bridge between the grassroots and the government is its incorporation of rank and file elements of the armed forces. As Denis notes, “The popular movement does not consist of only social movements, there are also military movements ... soldiers and young military officers who go to workshops and participate in the dynamic of the popular movements.”⁵

Whatever the post-referendum strategy for the UBEs was at the time of their formation, their continued existence has since become an integral part of the as-yet largely unplanned future of the Bolivarian experiment. Chávez has declared the arrival of a new stage of *el proceso*, what he calls the “revolution within the revolution.” But post-referendum Venezuela was going to be a new stage, with or without Chávez’s blessings.

The need to defend Chávez has—for the moment—receded, providing an opportunity for proactive Chavismo to fill the vacuum. The UBEs are in the process of redefining themselves as social battle units (UBSs), shifting their focus from electoral processes to community needs. Duly reinforced after the referendum and the regional elections, we may now see a nationally coherent Chavismo emerge, supportive of the process but capable of the difficult introspection necessary to identify its weaknesses, and ultimately, of the structural transformation that may eventually see the convergence of social movement and state. ■

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8. See: Elide Rugai Bastos, *As Ligas Camponesas* (Petropolis: Vozes, 1984).
9. See Bradford and Rocha, *Cutting The Wire*, and interview with Geraldo Fontes, member of the National Coordinating Council, São Paulo, September 17, 2003.
10. In field research in Rio Grande do Sul State in 2001, the author observed a mixed grade class in one of the *campamentos* learning about "transgenicos"—genetically engineered crops, their hazards and the corporations that control them. The MST produces educational material and guides—as well as training and orientation—on how to develop schools and popular education. See: "O que queremos com as escolas dos assentamentos," *Caderno de Formação* No. 18, March 1999; and *Como fazemos a escola de educação fundamental*, *Caderno de Educação* No. 9 (MST, Education Sector, 1999).
11. The neighborhood organization of ten families could be the base unit (*núcleo de base*) in a larger cooperative or settlement, or even a temporary encampment. Each group then sends two representatives to a ruling council in each

- settlement, cooperative or encampment. General meetings in which all can participate are also held. These organizations in turn send representatives to the regional and state congresses. Special meetings are held to pick the representatives to the National Encounters (every two years) and National Congresses (every five years). As per Geraldo Fontes, member of the National Coordinating Council, in interview in São Paulo, September 17, 2003.
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14. *Reforma Agrária, por um Brasil sem latifúndio* (São Paulo: Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra-MST, [2000]).
15. *Reforma Agrária*, p. 4.
16. See, for instance, the political education pamphlet that the MST uses to explain neoliberalism to its affiliates: *O Neoliberalism, ou o mecanismo para fabricar mais pobres entre os pobres*, Notebook No. 5 (São Paulo: Consulta Popular, 1993).
17. The Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), "Fundamental Principles for the Social and Economic Transformation of Rural Brazil," Translated by Wilder Robles, *Journal of Peasant Studies* (January, 2001), Vol 28, No. 2: p.153-154.
18. See Stedile interview this issue, p. 24
19. MST, *O Brasil precisa de um projeto popular*, Cuartilla No. 11 (São Paulo: Secretaria Operativa de Consulta Popular, 2000) pp.1-29.
20. It should, however, be noted that much of the press was not always sympathetic and condemned their land takeovers as illegal actions. The rural landowners also did all in their power to stop their actions and discredit them in the public eye.
21. See Donatella de la Porta and Sidney Tarrow, eds., *Transnational Protest & Global Activism* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2005).

Chavistas in the Halls of Power

1. As sociologist and political analyst James Petras noted in a recent interview (Caracas, December 2, 2004), the Chávez government has not done enough to foster employment through public works. However, an employment mission, "Vuelvan Caras," represents a significant first step, providing scholarships to hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans while training them in specific trades and in forming cooperatives.
2. Interview with author, Caracas, September 15, 2004.
3. Interview with author, Caracas, November 19, 2004.
4. Interview with author, Caracas, December 6, 2004.
5. Interview with author, Caracas, November 9, 2004.

The World Social Forum

1. Naomi Klein, "Reclaiming the Commons," *New Left Review*, Vol. 9, May-June 2001, p. 89.
2. See: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_lan guage=2>.
3. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalization," 2003, <<http://www.ces.fe.uc.pt/bss/documentos/wsf.pdf>>.
4. See: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_lan guage=2>.
5. John L. Hammond, "Another World Is Possible: Report from Porto Alegre," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 30, No. 3, May 2003, pp. 6-7.
6. Naomi Klein, "The Hijacking of the WSF," <<http://www.nologo.org>>, January 30, 2003.
7. Emir Sader, "Beyond Civil Society: The Left After Porto Alegre," in Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London: Verso, 2004).

Time of the Snails

1. Xóchitl Leyva Solano, "Regional, Communal, and Organizational Transformations in Las Cañadas," pp. 161-184 in Jan Rus, Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Shannan L. Mattiace, eds., *Mayan Lives, Mayan Utopias: The Indigenous Peoples of Chiapas and the Zapatista Rebellion*