

# Demonizing Venezuela's Revolution

Venezuela's socialist experiment, which seeks to reduce the country's extreme income equality and alleviate widespread poverty, has upset U.S. policymakers who now have new hopes for regime change, as Dennis J Bernstein explains.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The U.S. government, backed by the U.S. mainstream media, has long desired to destroy Venezuela's experiment with socialism, now including President Trump's threats of war and one-sided reporting hostile to the country's recent elections.

In August, Trump suggested military intervention, declaring: "This is our neighbor, we're all over the world and we have troops all over the world in places that are very, very far away. Venezuela is not very far away and the people are suffering and they're dying."

Meanwhile, the coverage of Venezuela in the U.S. corporate media marches in lockstep with the P.R. pronouncements of the U.S. State Department, ignoring any mitigating factors regarding Venezuela's economic troubles and dismissing the support that many Venezuelans still show for the revolution begun by the late President Hugo Chavez.

Law Professor Daniel Kovalik noted this U.S. media bias while serving as an in-country observer to the recent Venezuelan elections.

"The claims of fraud are groundless, and largely petty," asserts Kovalik. "I know this because I was one of nearly 70 election observers from all over the world in Venezuela for the October 15 elections, and our group reached very different conclusions about these elections than those being widely peddled... We witnessed numerous polling stations throughout Venezuela in which long lines of voters were able to cast their ballot freely, without coercion and in an atmosphere of calm."

Kovalik is the author most recently of *The Plot to Scapegoat Russia: How the CIA and the Deep State Have Conspired to Vilify Putin*. He is at work on a book about Venezuela and he teaches International Human Rights Law at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law.

Dennis Bernstein: You just got back from Venezuela. Why were you there?

Daniel Kovalik: I was invited as an election observer for the regional elections that took place on October 15.

Dennis Bernstein: Jimmy Carter has said that these elections in Venezuela were some of the fairest in the world.

Daniel Kovalik: Yes, he said they have the best election process in the world. I agree with him. They have an incredible uniform process throughout the country. As you know, the US does not. Every state chooses its own way to vote. In Venezuela, they have the same machines throughout the country. They are pretty much foolproof. You have to use a fingerprint to even activate the machine. You get a paper receipt, which you put into a box after you have cast an electronic vote. And if people are unhappy afterward, they can ask for an audit.

Dennis Bernstein: How does that compare to the situation in other countries?

Daniel Kovalik: I would say it is better than in the United States. We know from people like Greg Palast that something like a million people might have been wrongfully thrown off the voter rolls through a process called "cross check." You see gerrymandering, which even the courts have found to be racist. Venezuela is not affected by that sort of thing.

One thing the Bolivarian Revolution has done under Chavez was to create this very tight, open democratic process. The people are very proud of their system. It pains me to read the mainstream press, which is very critical of Venezuela.

Dennis Bernstein: Trump has even talked about going to war against Venezuela. The US State Department has drawn up plans to attack the country. What do you think are the real reasons behind such talk?

Daniel Kovalik: This is old-fashioned gunboat diplomacy, which the United States has been using against many countries but particularly against Latin America. With the election of Hugo Chavez in 1999, Venezuela decided that it wanted to take a different path than other countries in the region. They wanted to have a socialist economy, they wanted to use their oil revenue for social services. Today 70% of their oil revenues are spent on social services. That is anathema to the United States. You cannot decide to take yourself out of the so-called free market system and not expect retaliation from the United States.

Let's remember that the US supported a coup in 2002 against Chavez. They are open about the fact that they want regime change. And they want it not because they care about the people there but because they want to have Venezuela open for business. They want more control over Venezuela's oilfields. Venezuela has the largest oil reserves on earth. This is not about democracy. The US couldn't care less about democracy. You see this in Honduras, where we supported the coup [in 2009]. You see this in Colombia, where we look away from countless human rights abuses.

Dennis Bernstein: You have compared and contrasted Venezuela and Puerto Rico. Could you talk about that?

Daniel Kovalik: Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States and what have we done for them? Eighty percent of the country still does not have electricity. It is a very dangerous situation. Meanwhile you have Trump saying we can't be helping them forever! FEMA is still helping out in New York with the effects of Hurricane Sandy! This was like five years ago. FEMA people are still in New Orleans helping to clean up after Katrina. And now Trump is saying we may be done in Puerto Rico when we have barely even begun! And recall that, with the Jones Act, Puerto Rico cannot freely get assistance from other countries.

Dennis Bernstein: If I'm not mistaken, Venezuela stepped forward to offer assistance after Katrina hit and the victims were being ignored by the federal government.

Daniel Kovalik: And so did Cuba. Venezuela and Cuba do more for the world than any other countries. They have been the first responders to the cholera crisis in Haiti. With the help of Venezuela, Cuba has sent medical teams to 70 countries throughout the world. Even during their own difficult times they offer help to others.

Dennis Bernstein: Why would the United States be so fearful of the Bolivarian Revolution?

Daniel Kovalik: Noam Chomsky has said that Chavez helped liberate Latin America from foreign control for the first time in 500 years. That is the impact of the Bolivarian Revolution. For the first time, Latin America is throwing off the chains of empire that the United States and Spain before have had around that region.

[The United States] overthrew the democratic government in Guatemala in 1954 because United Fruit was afraid of land reform. We overthrew Allende in 1973 in Chile because ITT was worried about its business interests there. Time and again we overthrow democratic governments and install fascist dictatorships, and yet we are able to say with a straight face that we care about democracy? What we care about is making countries like Venezuela open for maximum exploitation by US companies and making their resources available to us at will. We have now just sanctioned Nicaragua because they are trying to build a canal through the country with the help of China. So none of this hand wringing is about concerns for democracy.

Dennis Bernstein: What are people in Venezuela saying about the struggle? There are significant shortages of important goods, medical goods.

Daniel Kovalik: People are honest and open about that. But they want to solve their own problems. One man approached me at a polling place and asked me to tell people back in the United States that this is what democracy looks like. He said, "Tell Donald Trump to leave us alone." A number of people expressed similar sentiments. These are voices you never hear in the mainstream press, you always hear the opposition.

Is there an opposition? Yes. Are there people who don't like the government? Yes. Yet [61] percent of the electorate voted on Sunday and Maduro's party won 18 out of 23 governorships. People ask, "How can that be, with all these challenges, with all these economic woes?" Well, it is not too surprising that people take umbrage when the United States threatens to invade their country.

Venezuelans are smart and they realize that the opposition forces are aligned with the US in this. They associate the opposition with foreign intervention. They associate them with a lot of the violence that has taken place in Venezuela. That is another thing that is not discussed: how the opposition has carried out brutal violence, particularly against people of color. If you go to a pro-Maduro rally, what you are struck by is that the people at that rally are poor and mostly black. This is the revolution in Venezuela. The well-to-do and the United States resent that, that these people are liberated for the first time in history.

You would think that progressive-minded people in the United States would be excited and want to support that process. Yet the propaganda is so thick in this country that people don't even realize which side is which. I can guarantee you, the US is not on the right side. They are now setting up a parallel government to the one in Caracas.

Dennis Bernstein: I remember when the United States under Reagan was trying to destabilize and get rid of the Sandinistas. When they couldn't get Costa Rica to go along, they essentially set up a shadow government in Costa Rica to try to overthrow the government there.

Daniel Kovalik: And we invaded Panama in 1989. It is still not known how many people died in the bombing. We claimed to be going after Noriega for drug running but the real reason was that Noriega had refused to let the country be used as a staging ground for the Contras. That was his sin, and his people paid dearly for that.

This is a history that people forget, but this history is relevant because we see it being played out right now with Venezuela. It is quite heartbreaking. A lot of the left in America has abandoned Venezuela. I was the only observer from either the US or Canada last Sunday. People have bought into the prevailing

narrative on Venezuela. They are struggling, they are having problems, but every time things begin to look better, such as after the July constituent assembly election, that is when the US ups the sanctions. Because they don't want stability in Venezuela. They want enough chaos to unseat President Maduro.

I think that the fact that people came out to vote like they did on Sunday and that they voted largely for the Chavista Party shows to the United States that they are not backing down. That they will not be bullied. I think they should be applauded for that.

Dennis Bernstein: How should the United States be relating to the people of Venezuela?

Daniel Kovalik: We should normalize relations with them, we should exchange ambassadors, we should stop the sanctions. We should certainly stop threatening military force. We need to let them make their own mistakes, find their own solutions, and run their own lives. That is what democracy is.

Dennis Bernstein: Where do you see this going?

Daniel Kovalik: Unless there are alternative voices speaking, it could be going in a very bad direction. Given the nature of the opposition and given how long the Bolivarian Revolution has been in power, if the right wing comes to power—and that could happen given the lack of resistance in this country to US foreign policy—you will see a bloodbath. You will see another Pinochet-type regime. You will see people being killed in the streets. Remember that when Pinochet came to power in Chile, killing about 3,000 people and torturing about 30,000 others, the Allende government had only been in power three years. The Bolivarian Revolution has been in power now for eighteen years. To undo that will take a lot of bloodshed. I have listened to NPR programs where commentators have been very clear that they would welcome such bloodshed!

Dennis Bernstein: Remind us, before we conclude, of who Simon Bolivar was.

Daniel Kovalik: He was the great liberator. He liberated the Andean region of South America from Spain. He had a dream of uniting Latin America into a single nation that could compete with countries like the United States. That was Chavez's dream too. When Chavez was elected in 1999, he took on the mantle of Bolivar. And again, according to Noam Chomsky, he succeeded in helping to liberate Latin America from US control. Unfortunately, we are seeing attempts to impose that control again.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at [www.flashpoints.net](http://www.flashpoints.net).**

