

## Venezuela: Update



*Venezuela has changed forever...* (Hugo Chavez)

*“Whoever coined the phrase ‘you don’t know what you got until its gone’ was talking about toilet paper, probably”* (Anonymous)

A beautiful country holding the world’s largest oil reserves, once known as the Paris of South America, which benefited from foreign investments, and strong influx of immigrants from Europe, has now become a source of media jokes and similar puns pertaining to their “crappy economy”. The reason for this unwelcome attention is that Venezuela is running out of toilet paper. A shortage of this most basic necessity is being blamed on “excessive demand” and “anti-Bolivarian conspiracy”. Commerce Minister Alejandro Fleming addressed this crisis by announcing that “the revolution will bring the country the equivalent of 50 million rolls of toilet paper”. “We are going to saturate the market so that our people calm down.” His strategy is unlikely to work since his numbers are 40 million short of the country’s normal consumption of toilet paper which runs about 125 million rolls.

As urgent as this current crisis may seem, the ongoing situation also involves shortages of food, clothing and other commodities with a bottom line reality that the entire Venezuelan economy is in the tank. Economic policies of the late President Hugo

Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution have been called "unorthodox". The controversial dictator picked fights with trading partners, mandated his own time zone and enforced strict currency and price controls. These state controlled prices set below market clearing profits always result in shortages. With toilet paper, for example, if the government says a roll should cost 50 cents, but supplies and labor cost 52 cents, local producers simply stop producing, with an always predictable result of scarcity. (Daniel Gross, "The Crappiest Economy", **The Daily Beast**, 2013/05/16)

And, of course, a serious lack of toilet paper is not only a problem but an attention grabbing symptom of ever increasing crises with rampant inflation adding to the misery of overcrowding, a drastic rise in violence, rolling blackouts, blood soaked protests against human rights abuses, poverty, corruption, drug addiction, trafficking and political oppression.

Decades of government mismanagement have resulted in a self-imposed curfew which is now a fact of life in what has become one of the world's most dangerous cities. Only the brave walk the streets after sundown, when cautious residents seek refuge indoors, the wealthy retreat behind their lavish, gated enclaves. In wealthy Country Club neighborhoods, sturdy walls, barbed wire and electric fences now block the view of homes and gardens once visible from the street. In one gated community, north of the capital, residents installed a mechanism that scans visitor's ID numbers, resulting in a seemingly interminable queue of vehicles waiting each day for permission to enter. Even the windows of high rise buildings have been fenced off with metal bars, like tightly clenched teeth bearing down upon the city. Meanwhile, legions of poor bolt the doors to their interminable clusters of makeshift, redbrick and zinc roofed dwellings. This "architecture of fear" affects all classes, in different ways, and still fear affects everybody. (Sofia Barbararani, ukguardian. March 1, 2017)

A lethal combination of poverty, corruption, and illegal firearms has peppered the capital with a pervasive infestation of *malandros* (thugs) willing to express kidnap for ransom, or even kill to acquire a car, phone or absolutely anything of potential value. With Chavez successor and marginally elected President Nicolas Maduro continuing a policy of state controlled prices, along with the rumored presence of Cuban torturers, this

situation is likely to remain volatile. Market stalls have sprung up, here and there, selling black market, staple necessities at exorbitant prices and shortages of desperately needed medical supplies continue to generate a humanitarian crisis.

It has been several years now since I have been to Venezuela and I have no immediate plans to return and still I greatly value that opportunity to visit as well as my often surprising experiences there. At the time of my Political Trauma seminar, Mr. Chavez was still in charge and I find it interesting that his daughter Maria Gabriela ,socialist-socialite, bon vivant, Pomeranian enthusiast, Instagram troll, as well as, reportedly, her father's *consentida*, is now allegedly worth at least 4.5 billion dollars in assets held in American and Aruban banks (ukdaily mail.com, August 10,2015)

Even then, among my seminar participants, gathered within a seemingly secure venue, there was a palpable sense that much of their population was living with a constant, all pervasive feeling of threat which I soon began to experience, as well. Looking back to those times with a view from our recent election of Donald Trump here in the USA, I see similarities in the false promises of authoritarian populism. As Venezuelan economist Andres Miguel Rondon makes clear, the recipe for authoritarian populism is universal. Find a wound common to many, someone to blame for it, make up a good story around this and mix it all together. Tell the wounded that you understand how they feel and that you have found the bad guys and label them. Minorities, politicians, immigrants, dissidents, "outside agitators", sexual deviants and so on, and caricature them as evil, vermin, masterminds, traitors and losers.

Next, paint yourself as a savior and capture the people's imagination with rapturous tales of patriotism and then vengeance. No need for policies and plans, your appeal to vengeance will launch and even sustain your movement, at least for awhile, for this brand of populism can only survive amid polarization. If there is any encouraging news, it may be that as history has shown, extreme polarities have a tendency to swing into their opposite pole in an effort to achieve at least some measure of balance.

(Washington Post, January 27, 2017 )

Also, from a systemic perspective, it is important to understand the many layers of complexity that have shaped Venezuelan history. Along with many other parts of Central and South America, many levels of this multi-racial society cannot be understood apart from the ongoing legacies of Colonialism. A thorough account of this historical reality is available in Eduardo Galeano's, now classic **Open Veins of Latin America**, who understood that specific personalities and political leaders are not the problem, but rather symptoms of deeper underlying problems. This is difficult to accept for those who wish to place singular blame on one particular leader or political party, without reflecting upon the converging situations that brought them into positions of power.

Soon after I returned to Argentina, I received a remarkable letter from an 11 year old boy, identified himself as an Indigo child, who had insisted on attending my event. Joseph was the first such child that I encountered during my travels and meeting him opened my awareness to the presence of many others. He began by thanking me for being willing to come to Caracas and overcoming my reluctance to address the topic of political trauma. He then continued on to share his own perspective on a remedy for ongoing violence in Venezuela which is here translated from the Spanish:

*Do you know what is needed in each Venezuelan home? Even if it seems simple...a pleasant space inside the dwelling where pastel colors show the colors of our ancestors, a nice "taparita" (colored gourd) decorated with the savors of a fruit, a rain forest tree stick to honor the indigenous, a Spanish mantilla in the drawers of women to honor the Spaniards, to also wear some pearls, place a drum, and wooden tray to honor our African slaves, so that our homes would have the balance of truth with joy. We need to forgo the proclaiming of our patriotic souls and devote ourselves rather to the soul of being human, honor our Creator and avoid religious images that call upon pain and darkness.*

Then, in short, this is a call for every home to become a "temple of peace". Whether or not one believes in the existence of the Indigos, this "child's" letter offers much for reflection.