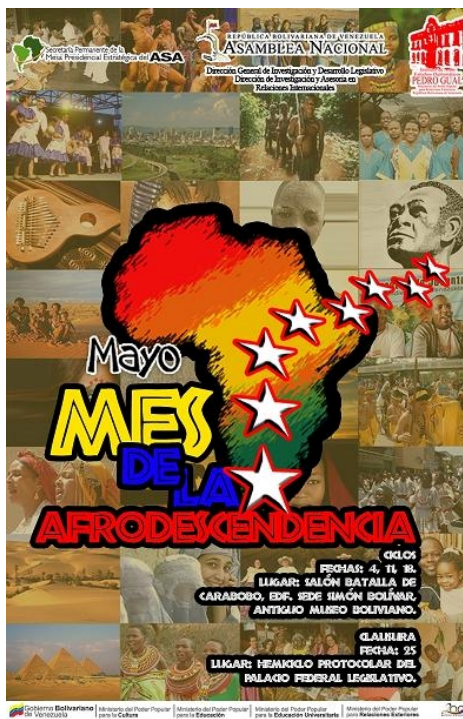




AFRO-VENEZUELAN AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM

Venezuela is making unprecedented progress in combating the historical legacy of racism and recognizing the national importance of its African heritage, through several governmental initiatives, such as the following:

- Recognition of intercultural education in the 1999 Constitution
- Social missions addressing poverty and inequality
- The creation of the Presidential Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in 2005
- New Education Law approved in 2009
- The incorporation of Afro-Venezuelan-specific questions in the 2011 Census
- The official celebration of the Month of Afro-Descendants and Day of Afro-Venezuelans in May
- The Establishment of the Vice-Minister for African Affairs
- The upcoming new law against racism and discrimination



Jews could not be accepted as immigrants in the country. This law was slightly modified in 1938 to allow the acceptance of a few members of these groups, but only with special permission from the Foreign Ministry. Only in 1966 did the government de-emphasize the issue of the immigrants' race in this law.³

Shortly thereafter, under the 1952-1958 dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez, the Plan of the Nation included an official plan for “whitening” the population. As he pointed out in his own words, “Within the big ideas of the national ideal it has been said, with full knowledge, that it is necessary to improve the physical environment and ethnic component. We have a number of physical and hereditary defects that must be corrected [...] Therefore,

among the questions of the *New National Ideal*, the first necessity is to mix our race with European peoples, [...] looking for a selective immigration, in simpler words, we want the very best we can find.”⁴

Venezuela, like many other Latin American countries, used the idea of the *mestizo* to uphold a myth of racial democracy that denied the fact that rampant discrimination on the basis of skin color and African identity took place.⁵

THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

An estimated 100,000 enslaved Africans were brought to Venezuela between the 16th and 19th centuries.¹ Most were sold to the central coastal states, which drove an agricultural economy based in coffee and cacao.

The abolition of slavery occurred in 1854, but freedom did not bring equality. Racism continued to flourish in Venezuela throughout most of the 20th century, and African heritage was denied through an emphasis on racial mixing. The *mestizo*, born of European, Indigenous, and African blood, became a cornerstone of national identity. In this scheme, Blackness was devalued to such an extent that state policies sought to “whiten” the population through European immigration.² For example, the Immigration Law of 1912 established that non-European individuals as well as

AFRO-VENEZUELAN TODAY

Historically, poor and rural citizens have lacked access to health care and education in Venezuela. Additionally, the areas with the largest Afro-Venezuelan populations have been traditionally the ones facing the highest levels of poverty.

Hugo Chávez is the first president in Venezuela's history to claim and honor his indigenous and African ancestry. In an interview with Amy Goodman in 2005, President Chávez said, “Hate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth, because



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of my curly hair. And I'm so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it's African."⁶

Since the first election of President Chávez in 1998, reforms have been gradually instituted to address the problems faced by the Afro-Venezuelan community and to extend to them important social, political, and economic rights.⁷ These reforms included the recognition of intercultural education in the 1999 Constitution, a diversity of social programs and new laws. For example, **in 2005 President Chávez approved Presidential Decree No. 3645 that established the Presidential Commission for the Prevention and Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination in the Venezuelan Educational System.**⁸

That same year the Venezuelan National Assembly officially designated May 10 as Afro-Venezuelan Day (Día de la afrovenezolanidad). Other advances also include the establishment of the Vice-Ministry for African Affairs. Additionally, this coming May the approval of a national law against racial discrimination and intolerance by the National Assembly is expected.

Education: Massive literacy campaigns and new educational institutions have allowed more than 1.5 million adults to learn to read and write, or to return to school. Due to subsidized education programs for elementary, high school, and college-aged students, Afro-Venezuelans are partaking in education at unprecedented rates. Once a privilege enjoyed by only a few, education is now considered a human right. **Additionally, in August 2009 a new Organic Law of Education was approved addressing the rights of Afro-descendants** in five of its articles, and opening the door to formulating new regulations dealing with specific issues concerning the Afro-descendant community. "The law requires that educational institutions teach the history of African descendants and prohibits the media from conveying messages of discrimination against Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendants."⁹

Health Care: With the 1999 Constitution, **Venezuela became the second Latin American country after Cuba to guarantee all citizens the right to basic healthcare.** To meet this goal, a partnership was initiated with the government of Cuba in 2003, which provided 20,000 medical professionals to treat previously underserved Venezuelans. In the eight years since the Mision Barrio Adentro ("Inside the

Neighborhood Mission") was created, thousands of community health clinics have been established throughout the country that **have directly benefited Afro-Venezuelans, which had been hit harder by the insufficient public health services in the country.** In that time, 302,171 lives have been saved and 7,382 babies delivered in the 6,712 facilities used for the social program.

Political Participation: Since 2003, millions of Afro-Venezuelans have been issued national ID cards guaranteeing them the citizenship rights they previously lacked. Article 56 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees all persons the right to free registration with the Civil Registry Office, a measure which **has facilitated the registration of Afro-Venezuelans and allowed electoral participation among them to grow tremendously.** Afro-Venezuelans have exercised their right to vote as well as to run for political office in unprecedented numbers over the course of the 16 elections that have taken place in Venezuela since 1998.

In the Chávez administration, Afro-Venezuelans occupy important posts as legislators, ambassadors, and assemblymen. Additionally, the Chávez administration is one of the few in Venezuelan history to include a black Venezuelan – **Aristóbulo Istúriz, now a vice-president of the National Assembly** – in the Executive Cabinet.

THE 2011 CENSUS

For the first time ever, Venezuela's 2011 Census will include a question that allows individuals to identify themselves as being Afro-descendent. This move came at the behest of social organizations fighting for the explicit recognition of the Afro-descendent population in Venezuela. It will better allow Venezuela to recognize its diversity and respond accordingly to the specific needs of different groups. **The network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations estimates that there are more than seven million Venezuelans of African descent.**¹⁰

RELATIONS WITH AFRICA/CARIBBEAN

Venezuela has prioritized its relations with Africa by opening 18 new embassies in countries including Mali, Morocco, Congo, Angola, and many more. The



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diplomatic initiative has been accompanied by cooperative energy agreements as well as programs in health and education.¹¹

In the Caribbean, Venezuela is helping ease the energy burden faced by many countries through a plan called PetroCaribe, which provides countries with oil at market prices made affordable through beneficial financing terms. This aid provides member countries with energy and stimulates national and regional economic and social development. Currently, all but three countries in the Caribbean belong to PetroCaribe.

Additionally, Venezuela has provided consistent aid and support to the people of Haiti in the wake of the devastating January 2010 earthquake that struck the country. Over the course of the year since the earthquake, Venezuela sent 8,139 tons of food, medicines and other forms of humanitarian assistance. Venezuela has also provided vital financial assistance. Through the Bolivarian Alliance of the People of Our Americas (ALBA), Venezuela established a \$100 million Humanitarian Fund. Additionally, Venezuela fully forgave Haiti's \$395 million debt to PetroCaribe. In making the announcement in late January 2010, President Hugo Chávez stated, "Haiti has no debt with Venezuela – on the contrary, it is Venezuela that has a historic debt with Haiti." In a March 2010 international conference on Haiti, Venezuela announced that its assistance to Haiti from 2010-2016 would total \$2.4 billion.

Venezuelan personnel have also constructed and operate five camps for internally displaced people in Jacmel, Petit Goave, Grand Goave, and Leogane. The camps have served 5,431 families, amounting to over 25,000 Haitians. In a March 2010 letter to the president of the CITGO Petroleum Corporation, which is owned by Venezuela's state oil company, the president of the TransAfrica Forum, a human rights organization that works in Haiti, noted that Venezuelan camps "are the only camps that meet the UN standards for living conditions of IDPs [internally displaced people]."¹²

MOVING FORWARD

The legacy of racism and discrimination against Venezuela's Afro-descendants will not be resolved quickly, but the Venezuelan government under President

Chávez has started working with the Afro-Venezuela community and has taken some important steps to recognize and correct it. With time, and as social justice and Afro-Venezuelan groups continue to raise awareness about the issue outside and within the government, more programs that counter the devastating effects and vestiges of racism that still exist in the country today are certain to be developed and promoted.

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Press and Communications Office

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