



VENEZUELA: THE HEADLINES YOU MISSED IN 2010

BICENTENNIAL YEAR KICKS OFF

On April 19, 2010, Venezuela kicked off a year-long celebration of its bicentennial anniversary as an independent nation. The celebration will conclude on July 5, 2011, 200 years to the day that Venezuela formally declared its independence from the Kingdom of Spain.



DEMOCRACY CONTINUES CONSOLIDATION



On September 26, over 11 million Venezuelans [turned out to vote](#) in the country's legislative elections, a **historic 66 percent showing** that highlighted the [continued consolidation](#) of Venezuela's system of participatory democracy.

Since President Hugo Chávez was first elected in 1998, Venezuela has held **16 local, regional and national elections**, including a 1999 plebiscite on the country's new constitution

historic 2004 recall referendum. Additionally, once marginalized groups – such as **women, Afro-descendants and indigenous tribes** – **now enjoy expanded constitutional rights**. Of Venezuela's five branches of government, four were led by women until the end 2010.

The expansion of the country's democratic institutions and citizen participation were reflected in the [2010 Latinobarometro report](#), a public opinion survey of 18 countries in Central and South America. According to the report, **84 percent of Venezuelans support democracy – the highest proportion in the region** and an increase from the 64 percent that supported it in 1997.

Additionally, **the report showed that satisfaction with democracy in Venezuela has increased during President Chávez's government**. In 1997 and 1998 satisfaction stood at 35 percent, rising to an average of 48 percent between 2000 and 2010 (in 2010 it reached 49 percent), third in the region behind only Uruguay (62 percent) and Costa Rica (53 percent), and above the regional average of 35 percent.

Fifty-three percent of Venezuelans approved of President Chávez's government from 2002-2010, putting it fourth in the region behind Argentina, Colombia and Chile and tied with Brazil.

New Books on Venezuela

"Venezuela Speaks! Voices From the Grassroots"
By Carlos Martinez, Michael Fox and Jojo Farrell

"Who Can Stop the Drums?: Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela"
By Sujatha Fernades

POVERTY & INEQUALITY DECREASE

The strengthening of Venezuela's democracy has benefited not only from expanded political rights, but also a heightened emphasis on economic and social rights.

A report issued by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in October 2010 found that **poverty in Venezuela dropped by 44 percent** between 1998 and 2008, the **single biggest decrease in the region**. Additionally, in the same period Venezuela saw a **17.9-percent decrease in economic inequality**, a rate five times that of its regional neighbors.

Between 1998-2008...

↓ Poverty down 44%

↓ Inequality down 17.9%

Venezuela's [continuing social advances](#) led to a **10-spot jump on the UN's Human Development Index from 1998-2008**, as more Venezuelans have [gained access](#) to health, education and food. According to Venezuela's National Institute of Statistics, \$330 billion has been directed to social programs over the last 11 years – representing 66 percent of total tax revenues in the country.

That spending has gone to programs like *Barrio Adentro*, an [innovative health initiative](#) that places doctors and medical clinics in low-income communities. It also funds programs like Mision Milagro – Miracle Mission – which in 2010 [reached a significant milestone](#) by having offered one million free eye surgeries to Venezuelans and citizens of other countries.

During the **UN Millennium Development Summit** in New York in September 2010 **Venezuela announced that it had achieved** a number of its development **targets ahead of schedule** and would meet the remaining ones by the 2015 deadline set by the organization.



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

According to the 2011 Latinobarometro survey, 52 percent of Venezuelans stated that the government's policies improved their lives, third in the region behind only Uruguay and Chile. They also ranked their country highest in the region in terms of distribution of wealth, with 38 percent saying it was "Very Just" or "Just." The regional average was 21 percent.

BOLIVARIAN HALL RE-INAUGURATED



On March 25, 2010, the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington, D.C. [re-inaugurated the Bolivarian Hall](#), its cultural space, with a rousing concert featuring famed Venezuelan performers Serenata Guayanesa and Cecilia Todd.

The hall, which had originally been built as a part of the Ambassador's Official Residence in 1940, served as office space for the embassy until 2003, when Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez opted to use it as a multi-cultural space for art, music, dance, photography, discussion and debate. In 2009, the hall began a year-long renovation, culminating in the March 2010 **re-inauguration concert that was attended by over 200 people**, including journalists and diplomats.

In a September 2010 article on the Bolivarian Hall, *The Washington Diplomat* [noted](#), "Venezuela boasts one of the most active cultural centers on Washington's Embassy Row, attracting Venezuelans and Americans alike to its numerous events." The embassy, said the article, "already hosts 100 concerts, art exhibits, poetry readings, films and dance workshops every year — making it one of the most culturally active diplomatic missions in town."

The Bolivarian Hall is located at 2443 Massachusetts Avenue NW in Washington, D.C.

VENEZUELANS MAKE HISTORY IN MLB, NBA

While Venezuela has long been recognized as a baseball powerhouse, in 2010 it [reached a new milestone](#) – **58 Venezuelans played for Major League Baseball teams**, second only to the Dominican Republic in terms of foreign players in the MLB ranks.



More importantly, though, was the impact those Venezuelans had on U.S. baseball. **Notable was Andres Galarraga, the Detroit Tigers pitcher** who on June 2 came [within a breath of a no-hitter](#), until a botched call by an umpire robbed him of the opportunity of being the twenty-first player in MLB history to achieve the distinction. Regardless, Galarraga accepted umpire Jim Joyce's apology, cementing him as one of baseball's most important sportsmen.

In a letter to Galarraga, Venezuela's ambassador to the U.S., Bernardo Alvarez, expressed his congratulations and pride for the near-achievement. "The professional decorum you displayed, much as your sensitivity when you declared to the media that 'we are all human and we make mistakes,' are demonstrations of your great sense of humanism that far surpasses the great dedication you have to your sport. It makes us proud as Venezuelans...to know that you represent the best values of the Venezuelan people," he wrote.

Another important milestone for Venezuelans in the MLB was reached by Félix Hernández, a pitcher for the Seattle Mariners who [won the American League's Cy Young Award](#) with 21 of 28 votes. Hernández posted league-leading figures in ERA (2.27) and innings pitched (249 2/3). Additionally, he finished second in strikeouts, with 232, in the American League

In recognition of Venezuela's longstanding links to MLB baseball – the first player to play on a U.S. team dates back to 1939 – on June 23, 2010 the New York Mets [hosted "Venezuelan Heritage Night" at Citi Field](#) during a game between the Mets and the Detroit Tigers. On the special night dedicated to Venezuela, a total of eight Venezuelan players came together on the field.

In another milestone, but this one in basketball, **Venezuelan Greivis Vasquez became only the third player to join the ranks of the NBA** when he was drafted by the Memphis Grizzlies in June 2010. Prior to being drafted, Vasquez was a stand-out player at the University of Maryland.



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

CABLE CAR GETS MOMA RECOGNITION



A distinct part of the Caracas landscape was recognized in [an important art exhibit](#) this year – a cable car.

In the “Small Scale, Big Change: New Architectures of Social

Engagement” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (**MoMA**) the Metro Cable San Agustín – a cable car line connecting poor mountainside communities to downtown Caracas – [was highlighted](#) as one of eleven architectural projects on five continents that “respond to localized needs in underserved communities,” according to the museum. “These innovative designs signal a renewed sense of commitment, shared by many of today’s practitioners, to the social responsibilities of architecture.”

The Metro Cable, which stretches high above Caracas, was first proposed in 2003, gained government support in 2006, started construction in 2007 and opened for service in January 2010. In its first year of operation it [carried over 975,000 passengers](#). It runs from Parque Central in downtown Caracas up one of the mountains that ring the city’s valley, serving four stops, including the uppermost terminus, San Agustín. It is just under a mile long, and a trip along from one end to the other takes ten minutes.

The Metro Cable is **a small part of an expanding network of services and connections being provided** to isolated or underserved communities **in Caracas and throughout Venezuela**. Since 2003, a number of social programs launched by the government of President Chávez have brought much-needed medical services and educational facilities into neighborhoods that had never had them. Additionally, a rapidly expanding network of communal councils has allowed communities to better organize and access resources for improvement of their neighborhoods, villages and towns.

The exhibit was open from October 3, 2010 to January 3, 2011.

PRESIDENT CHAVEZ JOINS TWITTER

In April 2010, President Chávez jumped into the world of social networking and joined Twitter. Within two weeks, he was the [most followed Venezuelan](#) on the network – his username is [@chavezcandanga](#) – In November 2010, he [celebrated his one-millionth follower](#), making him **the third most followed head of state in the world** (after President Barack Obama



and the Office of the Prime Minister in the United Kingdom) and the single most popular elected leader using the service in Latin America.

In July 2010, **Twitter co-founder Dom Sagolla recognized Chavez’s use of the service, noting at a conference that he was likely the only head of state doing their own tweeting.** “There are a lot of presidents who use Twitter, but the case of Venezuela is unusual.” Recognizing the power of Twitter, as a direct means of communication, President Chávez has assigned a number of aides to follow up on citizen requests and concerns.

Since President Chávez joined the network, Twitter saw a 4.8 percent increase of users throughout Venezuela, pushing it to third behind only Indonesia and Brazil in terms of the network’s penetration. Additionally, over five million Venezuelans use Facebook.

The use of online social networks mirrors a [dramatic growth in access to the Internet](#) in Venezuela. Since 2000, the number of Venezuelans with **access to the Internet has grown from 800,000 to over 7.5 million**. In 2000, only three percent of the Venezuelan people were online; in 2009, that number stood at 27 percent.

The Venezuelan government has moved aggressively to make access to the Internet free and universal. In recent years, 668 Infocenters – community-based Internet access points – have been founded, and \$10 million was set aside to build 200 more in 2010. The Infocenters were [awarded a UNESCO prize](#) in December 2010.

Venezuela’s embassy joined Twitter in February 2010, and can be found at [@VzlaEmbassyUS](#).

OLIVER STONE GOES ‘SOUTH OF THE BORDER’

In July 2010, Academy Award-winning filmmaker Oliver Stone released his newest documentary, [“South of the Border.”](#)

The documentary follows the presidents of Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, Ecuador, and Cuba as it analyzes the dramatic political, economic and social changes that have taken place in Latin America over the last decade. It also **seeks to counter the misrepresentations by the media on those countries and their leaders.**

In an **interview with Democracy Now!**, Stone explained what motivated him to make the documentary. “Chávez was sort of a natural, because he was such a demonized, polarizing figure. But when I met him, he was not at all what I thought, you know, what we made him out to be. So I went on from



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the United States

talking to Hugo. He suggested, you know, ‘Go talk to other people in the region. You know, don’t believe me necessarily.’”

“So we went around, and we talked to seven other presidents in six countries. And we got this amazing unity in saying...**these guys are changing the way Latin America is, and we don’t know this story in America,**” said Stone.

In an interview with *The Washington Times*, the documentary’s co-writer Mark Weisbrot described what the various governments have done that the documentary tried to focus in on. **“What they’ve done is provided increases in health care, for example.** In Venezuela now, people have access to health care. They didn’t have that before. They have greatly expanded access to education. **They’ve doubled college enrollment, for example, in the last decade.** Ecuador also has greatly increased spending on health care, Bolivia has increased public works employment... So it might seem radical, but it’s what people voted for.”

GAINS CONTINUE IN FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS

Over the course of 2010, the Venezuelan government [continued making gains](#) in the fight against drug production and trafficking. **During the year, various security agencies seized 63 tons of illegal drugs,** bringing to 584 tons the total amount seized during the 11-year period since President Chávez took office.

Also in 2010, 12,627 people were arrested on drug charges, **17 drug kingpins wanted by Interpol were captured.** Two of those kingpins were [handed over to the U.S.’s Drug Enforcement Agency](#), while others were deported to the countries of their nationality or where they were wanted for international crimes.

During 2010 Venezuela continued cooperating in the fight against drug trafficking through 59 agreements with 38 different countries, including Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Portugal.

ANDEAN BEARS WELCOMED AT NATIONAL ZOO



In May 2010, two Andean bear cubs – which are native to Venezuela – [went on display](#) at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. The two bears, Bernardo and Chaska, were the first of their type to born in the U.S. in the last five years.

At the naming ceremony, Dr. Angelo Rivero Santos, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of

Venezuela in Washington, D.C., noted that **the Venezuelan government has taken a number of steps to protect the endangered Andean bear, amongst other threatened species.**

Only an estimated 2,000 Andean bears are thought to reside in five western Venezuelan states, and since 1996 their hunting has been illegal in order to better protect them. Additionally, one of the proposals **Venezuela took to the Tenth Annual Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Japan in October 2010 was the increase of conservation measures for endangered species** like the Andean bear.

Dr. Rivero Santos also noted that the Andean bear serves as a representation of Venezuela’s natural beauty and diversity. In 2007, the image of the Andean bear – known in Venezuela as the *oso frontino* – was added to the 50 Bolivar Fuerte bill.

ALBA IN VANGUARD AT CANCUN SUMMIT

During the XVI UN Climate Change Summit in Mexico in December 2010, the member-states of the Bolivarian Alliance of the People of Our Americas (ALBA) strongly demanded that the developed world show the political will needed to stop global warming.

“Climate change is a global challenge in which we have shared but differentiated responsibilities. **We will do our part, but we want to see the same expressions of concrete political will [from the developed world],**” said Venezuela’s representative Claudia Salerno, speaking on ALBA’s behalf.

“Long and hard has been the path that we have advanced along since that fateful night in Copenhagen. We have faith that Mexico, as president of the summit, will **ensure that the multilateral system does not end up being an agreement of the few, negotiated in the dark,**” emphasized Salerno in reference to the summit that took place in 2009.

ALBA is a political alliance made up of Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela.

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