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A pink tide turns red

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By Jim Hodgson

You may have seen *Beatríz at Dinner*, a new film that stars Salma Hayak as an unexpected guest of some California one-per-centers. “All your pleasures are built on others' pain,” Beatríz says to her hosts. In good storytelling style, a personal conflict stands in for a profound social one: the relationship between power and wealth on the one hand, and vulnerability and poverty on the other. In the face of a monster, the film shows Beatríz making a choice: to kill or to die.

But there is a third choice (readers of *The Monitor* probably made this choice long ago): to join with others in working for social and ecological justice.

With the election of Hugo Chávez as president in December 1998, Venezuelans embarked on a decades-long effort to wrest control of the country from the tiny elite that had always run everything for their own benefit. Under the old rules, elite-backed parties would make promises and dole out favours, but nothing really changed for the impoverished majority. The government owned the oil company, but benefits accrued to senior managers, not the state.

Every step along Venezuela’s now 19-year-old transformation has been met with resistance. The old elites, together with middle class sectors that identify with them, were (perhaps predictably) unwilling to commit class suicide; they found powerful allies among foreign powers, including much of the international media. What is playing out now in Venezuela, with almost daily demonstrations, some of them violent, is resistance by those whose pleasure once depended on the pain of others.

In this piece, I want to share some thoughts about what has happened and why, together with some guesses as to what may happen now, and some lessons that might be useful in considering social change processes elsewhere.

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For many of us in Common Frontiers—the coalition of Canadian labour, human rights and religious groups working for trade justice in the Americas—our first contact with the new Venezuelan government came in November 1999 in Toronto. In those days, just a few weeks before the mass protests around the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, and less than 18 months ahead of similar protests at the Quebec City Summit of the Americas, it was still possible to gather civil society representatives and trade ministers into

a room for a conversation. Most of the government representatives talked proudly of "putting a human face on globalization," but the minister representing Venezuela drew applause for saying that concern for the rights of the poor needed to be central in trade talks and public policy-making.

In those years, Common Frontiers was working with other groups throughout the Americas in the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) to develop a different approach to trade and international relations. Latin Americans had lived through successive (and failed) "decades of development," and then through neoliberal dogma about restraint that was justified by a need to repay foreign debt.

In spaces like the World Social Forum and the HSA, new ideas emerged. A series of proposals that came to be known as Alternatives for the Americas were instrumental in eventually defeating the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) in 2005, and some proposals were adopted by some of the new "pink tide" governments that were elected in Latin America and the Caribbean in the years after the election of Chávez.

One of the first moves by the new Chávez government was to rewrite the national constitution. It came into effect following a plebiscite in December 1999, even giving the country a new name: the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The new constitution expanded civil rights and included socioeconomic rights, such as the right to employment, housing and health care, while also expanding minority rights (notably those of Indigenous peoples) and the rights of women. In 2001, some 49 laws were passed to redistribute land and wealth. Land reform continued in early 2005 with the abolition of large estates for the benefit of the rural poor.

In April 2002, as the government sought to bring the Petroleos de Venezuela state oil company and its revenue under more direct control, Chávez was briefly overthrown and imprisoned. The interim government suspended the new constitution, the supreme court and the national assembly. Popular protest and internal divisions led to the collapse of the coup and the return of Chávez after just 47 hours.

Two years later, the opposition succeeded in using one of the new constitution's mechanisms, the recall referendum, to try to remove Chávez from office. But Chávez ended up winning about 60% of the vote. He was re-elected in December 2006 and again in October 2012. After the death of Chávez from cancer, Nicolás Maduro was elected president in April 2013.

Throughout these past 19 years, the government has expanded access to health care, education, housing, public transit, food and pensions through *misiones*—popular campaigns that use oil revenue for public benefit. Venezuela has now given 1.7 million homes to the poor. There have been improvements in health care (including decreased rates of infant mortality, heart disease and new HIV/AIDS reports), education (including access to computers in schools), and new measures to protect the rights of women and LGBTI people, plus the creation of institutions like the Centre of African Knowledge and the Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples.

Here is what the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) report says concerning Venezuela:

"Venezuela's HDI value for 2015 is 0.767—which put the country in the high human development category—positioning it at 71 out of 188 countries and territories. The rank is shared with Turkey. [Neighbour Colombia is ranked at 95.] Between 1990 and 2015, Venezuela's HDI value increased from 0.634 to 0.767, an increase of 20.9%. Between 1990 and 2015, Venezuela's life expectancy increased by 4.6 years, mean years of schooling increased by 4.8 years and expected years of schooling increased by 3.8 years. Venezuela's GNI per capita increased by about 5.4% between 1990 and 2015."

In commenting on these numbers, the Portuguese economist Boaventura de Sousa Santos wrote: "It must be stressed that such progress was achieved in democracy, which was only interrupted by the 2002 attempted coup, a coup that had the active support of the United States."

Venezuela has worked with its neighbours to create new economic structures. In December 2001, Chávez proposed the creation of a new trading system, the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas. It would be known by its Spanish acronym, ALBA, which also means dawn. (Since then, the word "alternative" has been replaced by "alliance.") Launched three years later together with Cuba, ALBA soon attracted participation from Nicaragua, Bolivia, Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Ecuador, Antigua and Barbuda, and Honduras (at least until the 2009 military coup removed that country's progressive government).

In part, countries barter for exchanges through ALBA. The classic example is Cuban medical doctors for Venezuelan oil, but there is co-operation in industry, food production and energy security. Development projects have been supported in ALBA member states, as well as in Haiti, Surinam, Guyana, Jamaica and Belize. Venezuela has also created Petrocaribe as a mechanism for Caribbean and Central American countries to purchase oil on favourable terms: 40% to 50% up front and the rest to be paid over 25 years, with a 1% or 2% interest rate. Agricultural goods could also be used for payment.

But you wouldn't know any of that if you only looked at mainstream media. Even our beloved CBC and the left-leaning *Guardian* (U.K.) newspaper seem to get Venezuela wrong, most days at least. (You can balance your mainstream media diet with at least occasional looks at TeleSur's English service and at the website Venezuelanalysis.com). Some media will tell you that things have been going horribly wrong for the past 19 years; others will point to Maduro's four years in power as a catastrophic failure.

Yes, the collapse of world oil prices (from a peak of $115 per barrel in June 2014 to under $35 in February 2016) has hurt Venezuela, which derives 95% of its export earnings (and about half its GDP) from petroleum products. But considerably adding to the pain has been a strike by capital and a refusal by large corporations to produce or distribute food. We've seen this economic warfare strategy before, notably in Chile in the 18 months or so before the 1973 military coup that toppled Salvador Allende's socialist-led government.

Since April this year, opponents of the Maduro government have led almost daily demonstrations. Some of them have been peaceful, but many have included acts of vandalism, arson, and attacks on security forces. More than 100 people have died, but relatively fewer of these deaths have been attributed to government authorities compared with opposition violence or looting. Many of the deaths are the result of lynchings or sharp-shooter killings of people who, because of the colour of their skin or their being out of their own neighbourhood, are thought to be government supporters. Demonstrations and roadblocks usually occur in areas where local governments and their police forces are controlled by the opposition.

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In conditions of severe polarization, civil dialogue has become almost impossible. It's not that there are no legitimate criticisms to be made of the government. One might wish, for example, that much more had been done long ago to overcome criminal violence, advance LGBTI rights, protect the country's ecology, reduce dependence on oil revenue, and stimulate food production.

If only such criticism could be made in an atmosphere of civil debate without threats to overthrow the government or to foment violence. On the day after the revocation referendum in 2004, opposition leaders were on breakfast television talking about how to assassinate the president. The banner across the bottom of the screen read: "Defeat Chavez or Civil War."

Part of the problem is that the opposition parties are openly funded by two U.S. government agencies: the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Even the Central Intelligence Agency admits publicly that it is working with Mexico and Colombia against Venezuela.

At the root of U.S. opposition to the Bolivarian Republic is—you guessed it—oil. Venezuela is the third largest source of U.S. oil imports. An embargo on imports from Venezuela was apparently rejected by the Trump administration—the United States needs the oil—in favour of selective sanctions. But U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former head of ExxonMobil, will not forget the impact on the company when the Venezuelan government took back control of billions of dollars' worth of Exxon assets in 2007.

Even when viable mediation proposals are made, such as the one led by former heads of government from Panama, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Spain (which was backed by Pope Francis), the opposition refuses to join. Sadly, Canada and some other countries side with those who denounce Maduro as a "dictator" and refuse to press for peaceful solutions.

With regard to Venezuela, Canada has tended to follow the lead of the United States, Mexico and Colombia. Obviously, Canada and Mexico are playing different roles in the Americas today from the years after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, when they alone stood

with Cuba in this hemisphere in the face of U.S. hostility. But now they are renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement with a difficult administration in Washington.

What could happen? Some fear an outright U.S. invasion, or one that involves other countries that are hostile to the Maduro government. But Venezuela has tended to win all diplomatic struggles in the Organization of American States and at the United Nations, so a direct military invasion would be a lonely adventure, likely to be condemned by the international community. Among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, China, Russia and France stand with Venezuela.

What seems more likely than an outright invasion would be a prolonged "contra" style war—funded by the United States, modelled on the U.S.-financed mercenary fight against Nicaragua's Sandinista Revolution in the 1980s, and drawing troops from Colombia's paramilitary death squads. But it would be a devastating tragedy to see a new war begin just as Colombia finds its way toward peace.

A better outcome could emerge from the new constituent assembly: a new constitution that strengthens the power and participation of grassroots organizations (including workers), restructures municipal government, expropriates companies shown to have engaged in economic sabotage, and protects economic, social, cultural and environmental rights.

Over the past two decades, Latin American political parties of the left have won elections by setting social goals ahead of the narrowly defined neoliberal growth agenda that had previously reigned across the region. In Venezuela and other places, they reduced poverty by redistributing some wealth through pensions or other programs, but for the most part, they failed to reduce dependence on the export of raw materials.

An electoral defeat in Argentina, a military coup in Honduras, and parliamentary machinations in Brazil and Paraguay have seen the "pink tide" roll back, but social movements are still still thinking about alternatives and new steps. In part, that has to do with overcoming the region's colonial-style role in the global economy as a source of raw materials. But for many, it also means giving new content to the concept of democracy.

Uruguayan journalist Raúl Zibechi, a keen observer of Latin American social movements and the "pink tide" governments, points to two experiences that offer lessons in transforming power itself. One is the work of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico since 1994. To *mandar obedeciendo*—to rule by obeying the bases, the grassroots—is to infuse democracy with an ethical practice of permanent consultation that is deeper than electoral cycles. "Among the seven Zapatista principles is 'going down and not rising,' which is a basic characteristic of a new political culture that flies against the old culture of our left that seeks advantages, even individual ones, within the system and from the state," he said recently.

The other experience is in Venezuela itself, in the western states of Lara and Trujillo, from the city of Barquisimeto to the Andes region. Over the past 40 years, networks of rural and urban co-operativeshave established a viable way of life that is different from capitalism. "That is the new Venezuela, where ethics guide," Zibechi says.

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I opened this essay with the assertion that, beyond the choices which faced Beatríz after her dinner among a half-dozen of California's richest people—beyond killing or dying—many of us choose to engage in life-long struggles for social and ecological justice.

Making that choice, however, brings with it further choices. Since the 1970s in Latin America, the left in power has tried to govern according to the rules of liberal democracy, arguably without sufficient regard for the roles of money, foreign interference and private media conglomerates. When the poor win power and actually have a shot at changing the rules of politics and economics—at transforming the structures that made them poor—what may they do to hold on?

With the constituent assembly, in the face of strong external and internal opposition, Venezuela still has a long-odds shot at transforming democracy in a way that allows space for the majority of the population to continue reinventing Latin American politics and economics. Venezuelans should be given that opportunity, free from foreign intervention and with the solidarity of those who seek new approaches.

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