

Venezuela

Response to Information Request Number:	VEN02001.ZMI
Date:	April 30, 2002
Subject:	Venezuela: Information on Círculos Bolivarianos (Bolivarian Circles)
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Venezuela / Community groups / Paramilitary groups / Political violence / Protests / Social unrest

Query:

What are the Círculos Bolivarianos (Bolivarian Circles)? What is their role and where do they operate?

Response:**BACKGROUND**

Bolivarian Circles were created in June 2001. The purpose of the neighborhood-based groups is to promote the values of 19th century independence leader, Simon Bolivar—moral character, love of country, and solidarity (LaFranchi 17 Jul 2001). The Bolivarian Circles are also a means for neighborhood groups to request assistance for community programs directly from President Chávez (THE FINANCIAL TIMES 15 Feb 2002).

Bolivarian Circles are made up of 7 to 11 members, led by a First Coordinator (Primer Coordinador) and a Second Coordinator (Segundo Coordinador). Bolivarian Circles may have fewer than 7 or more than 11 members if that is more appropriate for the group. Individual circles may also adopt names for their group. The assistant national coordinator for Bolivarian Circles, Henry Álvarez, indicated that the only requirement for membership in the Bolivarian Circles is belief in Bolivarian ideals. Traits such as race, sex, religion, marital status, and profession are not considered for membership. In November 2001, Álvarez stated that there were 7,000 Bolivarian Circles in the country. The Chávez government set a goal of 12,000 circles, or 200,000 members, by the end of 2001. A toll-free number, 0-800-CIRCULOS, was established in November 2001 to disseminate information on the circles to individuals interested in forming new groups (García Nov 2001).

Supporters of Bolivarian Circles contend that the circles are apolitical and serve as a liaison between communities and the government, facilitating assistance for community improvement projects. Projects undertaken by Bolivarian Circles include health, public transportation, and urban clean-ups. Instructions on the formation of the Circles state that their role is to discuss community problems and report them to the appropriate entity to identify a solution consistent with the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela (García Nov 2001). Proponents of the Bolivarian Circles note that they fulfill part of the new constitution's mandate to increase political participation (AFP 18 Jun 2001).

Álvarez denies that indoctrination is one of the goals of the Bolivarian Circles. Opponents contend that the groups resemble Cuba's Committees for Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) and serve to further the Cubanization of Venezuelan society (AFP 18 Jun 2001).

Financing of the groups is unclear, as the Government of Venezuela, in its press release announcing the Bolivarian Circles, denies that they will receive any public monies (Government of Venezuela 13 Jun 2001). Yet, one of the main purposes of the groups is to request assistance from the government to complete community improvement projects.

ROLE OF BOLIVARIAN CIRCLES IN PROTESTS

Bolivarian Circles took part in protests prior to April 11, 2002. On January 7, in response to President Chávez's criticism of EL NACIONAL newspaper in his weekly radio program, Bolivarian Circles blocked the entrance of the newspaper's offices for over an hour, banging pots. They left once the police intervened (IPS 8 Jan 2002).

In February 2002 a delegation from the Inter-American Press Association reported that there is a lack of press freedom in Venezuela. The "IAPA expressed its solidarity with numerous journalists and news media executives who have been threatened, berated, and abused physically and verbally, particularly by members of the Bolivarian Circles who echo President Chávez's constant discrediting of the press in his public statements and radio addresses" (IAPA 25 Feb 2002).

The coup and counter-coup of April were the result of a strike at the national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA). On April 9, 2002 striking oil workers clashed with Bolivarian Circles outside PDVSA headquarters, resulting in the injury of at least 18 people (MSNBC/AP 10 Apr 2002).

SOCIAL UNREST OF APRIL 11 TO APRIL 14, 2002

There have been reports of Bolivarian Circles' involvement in the violence during the protests and coups of April 11 to April 14. THE MIAMI HERALD reported that 200 Bolivarian Circle leaders met at a municipal printing office the morning of April 11 to call for Chávez supporters to rally near the presidential residence (18 Apr 2002). Bolivarian Circles have been accused in firing on demonstrators at the April 11 anti-Chávez demonstration (THE GUARDIAN OF LONDON 12 Apr 2002). At the time this query was written, investigations into the precise nature of violence between April 11 and 14 were underway.

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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