

Venezuela Overview

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Environment

Venezuela is located in northern South America and is bounded on the north by the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. The geography of Venezuela consists of mountainous regions that extend to the Colombian Border, plains delineated by the Orinoco River, and the coastal region. Venezuela has at least 36 distinct minority groups inhabiting all 23 states. Afro-Venezuelans are highly concentrated along the Caribbean coast and indigenous people are the majority in the Amazonian region.

Peoples

Main languages: Spanish, indigenous languages

Main religions: Christianity (majority Roman Catholic), African-derived and indigenous religions

Minority groups include Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous peoples.

According to the 2001 constitution, indigenous peoples number 534,816 (2.2%), representing 28 groups, the largest of which include the Wayuú, Warao, Pemón, and Añu. More than 95 per cent of indigenous people live in nine of Venezuela's 23 federal districts. Official data has never been collected on the Afro-Venezuelan population.

History

Upon arrival in Venezuela, the Spanish conquerors found a diverse array of settled as well as nomadic and semi-nomadic indigenous groups. During the Spanish colonial regime the indigenous population retained their resguardos, communally held reserved land, but these were largely destroyed after independence. Venezuela also imported a considerable number of enslaved Africans to work on cocoa plantations starting in the 16th century. Miscegenation, or racial mixing, resulted in a complex system of ethnic inclusion and exclusion. Although the Venezuelan government has only officially recognized 28 indigenous groups, the 2002 census shows that there are at least 35 distinct groups.

Governance

An attempted military coup in 1992 and a series of general strikes due to discontent with economic and

agricultural policies, threatened Venezuela's democratic government. Although Chavez was elected to the presidency by popular vote in 1998, his rise to power came after he participated in the 1992 attempted coup in which 120 people were killed. Operating on what some call a populist platform, Chavez has enjoyed overwhelming support by the majority of the Venezuelan population, among them many Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous people. However, Venezuelan politics have become increasingly polarized under the Chavez administration. With sharp divides between the Chavistas (supporters of Chavez) and the AntiChavistas (the opposition), ethnic and racial undertones pervade Venezuela's current political environment. Some of Chavez's controversial reform policies include the gradual de-privatization of oil industry as well as the granting of collective rights for indigenous people.

In 2002, amidst work stoppages and weeks of massive protest in opposition to Chavez, the Organization of American States facilitated the calling of a referendum to determine if Chavez should finish his presidential term. In 2004, Chavez won the referendum, and since has continued his sweeping policy reforms aimed at bringing justice and equality to the poor. The opposition asserts that such reforms threaten both democracy and the economy in Venezuela. The popular classes, including many Afro-Venezuelans and indigenous people, have supported the Chavez government.

Although indigenous rights have been at the forefront of Chavez's political agenda, his government has done little in the way of guaranteeing official recognition or rights for Afro-Venezuelans. Nevertheless, Chavez's acknowledgement of his own African heritage paired with his campaign to improve the living conditions of the poor more generally has resonated with the majority of Afro-Venezuelans. In March of 2005, Chavez re-designed the Venezuelan flag and among the changes are the inclusion of indigenous symbols and a machete, which has been interpreted as a symbol of the noble peasant and in some cases as representative of Afro-Venezuelans.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Although minority groups in Venezuela still suffer from political and economic exclusion, some important advances have been made in recent years, particularly related to indigenous peoples. Responding to pressure by indigenous groups such as the umbrella organization, Venezuelan National Indigenous Council (CONIVE), one of President Chavez's first acts in office was to reform the 1961 constitution. The new 1999 constitution recognizes indigenous languages in addition to Spanish as the official languages of Venezuela and grants indigenous groups a host of rights including collective land rights, the use of and right to be consulted about natural resources in their territory, and three seats in the National Congress. Noeli Pocaterra an indigenous Wayu congresswoman continues to hold the position of vice president of Congress.

Although the new constitution marked a considerable leap forward in indigenous rights, Afro-Venezuelans were not mentioned anywhere in the document. Because people of African descent have largely assimilated into and contributed to constructing Venezuelan culture, they are considered and in many cases identify as part of the Creole majority. Despite increased organization by Afro-Venezuelan leaders, blacks are still not officially considered a distinct racial or ethnic group and thus racial disparities and discrimination against them remains invisible. Although Afro-Venezuelan organizations and the Venezuelan government participated in the UN Third World Conference against Racism in Durban South, Africa in 2001, unlike other Latin American countries, this did not result in any explicit policy reforms benefiting Afro-Venezuelans.

In the 2002 census Venezuela collected information on the indigenous population. In comparison with the 1992 indigenous peoples census, this data indicates an increase from 1.5 to 2.1 per cent of the total population and also recognizes seven more indigenous groups than in 1992. Although the indigenous population might indeed be growing in Venezuela, most attribute these increases to better data collection

as well as a general increase in self-affirmation by indigenous people as a result of the 1999 constitutional reform process.

Answering demands by indigenous leaders, on Columbus Day of 2005 (renamed by Chavez as the Day of Indigenous Resistance), Chavez officially called for the expulsion of New Tribes Mission, the most prominent US-based missionary agency operating in Venezuela. Still, the presence of international corporations and tourism operators on ancestral lands has contributed to the deterioration of the environment and indigenous peoples' traditional ways of life. In addition, despite Chavez's Guaicaipuro Program to demarcate and title land for indigenous groups, little progress has been made.

Although official data of Venezuela's black population is lacking, other research suggests that Afro-Venezuelans like Afro-Latin Americans more generally fare poorly in the areas of employment, health and education compared to their white and mestizo counterparts. Moreover, human rights violations continue to be alarmingly high in many Latin American countries and Venezuela is no exception. The country suffers from increasing rates of violent crime, which disproportionately affect people of African descent. In March of 2004, in a trip organized by TransAfrica Forum, a high-level delegation of African Americans met with government officials in Venezuela. Resulting in a number of high-level policy initiatives including the establishment of May 10th as the Dia de Afrovenezolanidad, this visit brought issues of marginality and racism to the centre of politics. It also incited public debate within Venezuela and among Chavez opponents in the US about the extent to which Afro-Venezuelans suffer from racism in Venezuela.

In December 2006 elections Chavez won a third term with over 60% of the vote. Chavez has openly declared his African and Indigenous heritage and draws much of his support from the country's poor and marginalized; most of whom share the same roots.

In 2007 challenges to minority rights continued to come from conservative business organizations like FEDECAMARA that have denounced indigenous rights recognition specifically and the idea of multiculturalism in general.

On March 20th 2007 thousands of urban and rural Afro-Venezuelans took to the streets of the capital Caracas, in a march for recognition. The Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations (ROAV) presented a proposal calling for a rewriting of the constitution to include text in the preamble related to the many sacrifices made by Africans and their descendants in gaining the country's independence.

They also requested the inclusion of a special chapter dedicated to Afro-Venezuelan communities: highlighting respect for their spiritual values, protection of ancestral lands and ecology and inclusion in the educational curriculum of their cultural and historical contributions.

Moreover in June 2007 with support from the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture and UNICEF, the Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations organized an international seminar to gather regional experiences on statistical inclusion of Afro descendant populations with the aim of eliminating Afro-Venezuelan invisibility in the next census (2010).