

Analysis.

The Crisis in Venezuela and Latin America:

The expectations of the poor and the role of the church

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

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Miami, FL (LAMNS)—The chaotic events surrounding the attempted coup in Venezuela have focused attention on the failure of populist governments, such as that in Venezuela, to deliver on their promises to help the poor. They have also led Christians to evaluate their ministries and search for ways in which they can better serve their country.

“The immediate impact on the evangelical church will be varied,” said Laura Smith, a missionary with the Latin America Mission (LAM), who teaches at the Evangelical Seminary of Caracas.

Smith, who is from Winsted, Connecticut, said that many evangelicals were greatly relieved even though they mourned the loss of life when President Hugo Chavez was temporarily overthrown on Friday, April 12 by a coalition of business and military leaders. “Others were devastated because their hopes in Chavez weren’t fulfilled,” she said.

In a confusing sequence of events, Chavez was ousted and arrested by his military high command after gunmen opened fire on at least 150,000 people marching on the presidential palace to demand his resignation. He was returned to power just two days later after loyalist military officers peacefully rebelled and tens of thousands of Venezuelans converged on the palace to demand Chavez’s return.

A report released by two local human rights groups, COFAVIC and the Archdiocese of Caracas Human Rights Vicar, said 46 people were killed and over 300 injured. It accused security forces of being responsible for most of the deaths. Witnesses have said police opened fire on pro-Chavez demonstrators in several poor neighborhoods of Caracas.

A lack of support from neighboring Latin American countries and strong backing among Chavez’s poor constituents who live in rundown neighborhoods ringing the capital city forced the new government to resign and returned Chavez to power.

Chavez had long promised to bring relief to the country’s poor who to make up 85% of the population. However, his erratic governing style, his coziness with Cuba’s Fidel Castro and his frequent anti-American rhetoric have left many of the country’s business class and some religious leaders with a growing uneasiness.

Chavez had openly broken with the dominant Roman Catholic Church, calling the church a “tumor on the country” and accusing church leaders of conspiring to oust him from office.

As tensions increased before the attempted coup, church groups called for prayer and a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

Evangelical church leaders announced a march in the capital, Caracas. Organizers called for the public manifestation in light of “the moral and spiritual decadence in the country.” They called on Venezuelans to change the direction of their lives, to repent, and to work for a bright future for the nation.

Meanwhile, Roman Catholic archbishops called on Venezuelans to keep calm and reflect on what was happening in the country.

Religious leaders, including Rev. Sam Olson, president of the Evangelical Council of Venezuela, participated in an ecumenical service for the families of those who died in the violence.

Most observers agree that Chavez's popularity comes in large part from the failure of Latin American governments to address the pressing issues of poverty, corruption and core freedoms. "It is well known that democracy is seen as 'on trial' in Latin America," said Clyde D. Taylor, former U.S. ambassador to Paraguay who serves as the vice chairman of LAM's Board of Directors. "Countries who in the 1980s moved away from their authoritarian pasts and adopted pluralistic forms of governance expected social and economic benefits that, in general, have not arrived."

Taylor, who lives in Washington, D.C., said that, "Without systems in which citizens are involved in the entire process of governance no amount of privatization, elections and freedom will bring the fruits associated with mature democracy."

"It is most unfortunate that a product of the frustration with the 'democracy experiment' is a return to populism," Taylor said. "This return is seen in its extreme in Venezuela where the frustrated poor in desperation supported a classic 'caudillo' with military stripes."

Taylor asserted that this process is seen in many countries "where politicians prosper only by appealing to the fears and frustrations of the poor, raising again the specter of class struggle and diverting attention from the reforms necessary for genuine progress."

"The evangelical church, which supported him at first, feels ripped off," said Dan Rambow, an LAM missionary from Boca Raton, Florida, who serves in Valencia. "The poorer ones are still 'Chavistas' because they've nothing to lose."

"If there was a possibility of Chavez resigning, it is gone now," said Ed Vernoy of Litchfield, New Hampshire, who serves in Barquisimeto under the Baptist Bible Fellowship. "This whole episode has made him almost a martyr figure to his own people."

In spite of major internal opposition Chavez has made his mark among the poor, even if he has not been able to deliver all that he promised. "Many of those who hold the power in the city, who are wealthy, who have been involved in the politics of the country for a very long time have suddenly taken the back seat and many of the poor have been empowered," said Greg Burch of Mission Viejo, California, who works with street children in Caracas.

Burch said that a friend from a poor neighborhood reported that Chavez was the only president to ever visit her community. "She was proud of the fact that Chavez had visited her barrio, She felt like she counted for once."

While elected on a promise to improve the condition of Venezuela's poor, Chavez has been able to do little to alleviate their situation. "People like Chavez, who apparently wants to help the poor, are fighting against a system that has been set up for close to 500 years," Burch explained. "That system is based upon a structure of injustice. The way things work favor the rich."

Many observers credit Chavez's popularity with the poor as a key element in his return to power. "Chavez runs more on charisma and rhetoric than ability," said Stephen Armet, an LAM

missionary who works with the poor in Bogotá, Colombia. “Changing the structures of society that are responsible for institutional poverty is very difficult because they are so entrenched and have a long tradition.”

“Furthermore, they are controlled by the elites of society who have ties with international capitalism and whose only interest is to maintain their advantages and status,” said Armet who is from Los Angeles, California. “It is they who have the most to lose if the structures were altered.”

“This may be the very first time in Latin America that a military coup d’état was aborted by the intervention of millions of poor people,” said C. René Padilla, one of the region’s leading evangelical theologians. “This is not meant to be an approval of all that Chavez has done, but a definite agreement with all that has to do with his courage to take concrete steps toward a more just society, over against big economic interests that are oppressing the poor.”

With all of the focus on the political and military maneuvers, Burch, an LAM missionary, said that attention must be paid to those who suffered in the violence. “We should remember to pray for the children who are living on the street in the midst of the protests and riots,” he said. “Some of these children are living in harm’s way.”

Burch and other Christian observers in the region said that the lessons of the Venezuelan political turmoil are that the church must continue its ministry among the needy. “I believe that the church needs to be involved in giving the local community the resources to address the problems they face,” reflected Burch. “The key is not to do it for them, but to guide them in solving the problems they face.”

If a community cannot get the services it needs, “the local church needs to put pressure on that politician to do something,” Burch said. “It becomes a political issue, yet remains a basic spiritual issue as well.”

Yet, political involvement by evangelicals in Latin America has not always been successful. “Eight years ago there was a lot of hope for evangelical politics since (Alberto) Fujimori in Peru gained office, it was believed, by the evangelical vote in Peru,” said Armet. “(Jorge) Serrano was an evangelical president in Guatemala. Brazil had 29 (evangelical) federal deputies and senators. Even here in Colombia, the Union Christian Party had high hopes of having political success.”

Armet continued, “Fujimori and Serrano were both practically exiled and in Colombia, Christians don’t enter politics anymore. There doesn’t seem to be much promise there.”

Ambassador Taylor, who grew up in Colombia while his parents served there as missionaries, hasn’t given up on Christian political involvement. “We Christians forget that our Lord had a radical ministry, reaching out to the poor and oppressed,” he said. “Jesus spoke much more about money than about faith and prayer, yet his church is too often known for promising prosperity to its followers than being instruments of God’s love and justice to the poor and oppressed.”

“Christians everywhere, not just in Latin America, should, as individuals, be active in public affairs to reform society but without making the local church political,” Taylor added. “The church, however, should not shirk from upholding the biblical truths concerning what is righteous and what is evil.”

Concerning the church’s work with the poor, Padilla, an LAM missionary who lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina, said, “Evangelicals everywhere need to take to heart the teaching of the

scripture regarding the fact that God loves justice and therefore takes the side of the poor. That fact should define their political preferences.”

Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission’s web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM’s Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

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