

## CHAVEZ FOREVER – OR MAYBE NOT! By Si Frumkin

I was barely 18 when I arrived in Venezuela so my memories of it are somewhat vague. I remember that there were only about 400 telephones in the capital city so that every business had to hire a kid who would carry communications to other businesses and clients – the phones were controlled by a British firm which insisted that there was no need for expansion. While there I witnessed a revolution – the elected President was overthrown after only 8 months in office by a military junta. In retrospect it wasn't much of a revolution – there were armed soldiers and sailors in trucks speeding and blowing their horns, the police fired tear gas at pedestrians and I caught a whiff of it standing on a balcony overlooking the center plaza but there was no fighting, no violence. Next day it was all over, we had a new government, some of the politicians ran away with the treasury and the Venezuelan navy purchased two submarines as a reward for having supported the coup.

I had spent almost two years in England before coming to Caracas and was hoping to find a job at an American or British firm – I spoke English and was quickly learning Spanish – but after a year or so I was accepted by NYU and came to the U.S. New York surprised me – I couldn't understand the dialect of the Puerto Ricans there and they thought my Venezuelan Spanish hilarious. I missed my Venezuelan girlfriend who had introduced me to bullfights and taught me the words to "Cielito Lindo" but that soon faded and, like most Americans, I rarely thought about Venezuela in the 50 years that followed.

There was some progress there. There are plenty of phones, cars and TVs. There still are no roads to the interior to speak of but there are more than 450 airports throughout the country in the remote areas. The largest waterfall in the world still spills tens of thousands of gallons daily and the Caribbean beaches are gorgeous.

On the other hand, Venezuela imports most everything it consumes and pays for it with its main export – oil. Its oil production has been nationalized, blackouts are routine and crime is widespread. With the oil prices dropping to \$40 a barrel and PdVSA – the government controlled oil monopoly – owes its suppliers over \$8 billion that it doesn't have. There are reputable reports that over 200 companies are affected by the government not paying their bills and that this could affect 30,000 jobs.

In December 2006, Hugo Chavez was re-elected in a landslide for a 6-year presidential term. His popularity depends on the distribution of funds to the poor masses that constitute the majority of Venezuelans and who enthusiastically voted to install him as President. His anti-American stance and his clownish appearance on the U.N world stage have increased his popularity. He is also praised by Hollywood luminaries like Shawn Penn and Harry Belafonte who apparently never met a dictator they didn't like. Chavez is currently trying to increase his popularity by vicious verbal attacks on Israel and breaking off diplomatic relations with the Jewish state; a thuggish attack on a Jewish synagogue is seen as a covertly inspired governmental action. The only "good" news seems to be that the current inflation rate is down to 30.7% from 39% last year – it still is the highest in Latin America!

There has been hardly any mention in our media of the February 15 referendum that will change the future of Venezuela. The vote will approve or reject a constitutional amendment that would allow the indefinite re-election of the president, legislators, governors and mayors. In 2007 he was given the power to make and impose laws by presidential decree but a vote to abolish time limits for presidential tenure was narrowly defeated. Now, he is trying again. The February 15 referendum is not limited to only a lifetime presidency but would also apply to other elected officials like popular mayors and governors. Obviously, Chavez is counting on increased popular support and life

tenure like that of his fellow dictators in Cuba, North Korea, Zimbabwe and others like them.

The Chavez political party is frantically trying to stay in power – Chavez is using television as his bully pulpits, mass meetings and forums are taking place, and much money is spent to buy support and turn out the vote. However, lately and unexpectedly, with the drop of the price of oil, money is inconveniently scarce: Chavez has placed very sizeable orders for sophisticated Russian weaponry and has committed Venezuela to ongoing financial support to Cuba and other South American leftist regimes.

There is much disillusionment and much dissatisfaction but there is also loyalty and hero worship among people who voted for Chavez before and who may still have hope in him. The result of the referendum is unpredictable. We can only hope that on February 15 Venezuela will not emerge as yet another tragic dictatorship for many decades to come.