

Three Days Without Beer: Democracy In Venezuela

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Two days before the Venezuelan people reelected Hugo Chavez Frias as their president with an overwhelming margin, we sent a special delegation down from the mountain with a grave mission: find and retrieve six cases of Polar and five bottles of Real Carupano rum.

Maybe this was overkill for 10AM on a Friday morning, but we were not the only ones that day stocking up before the mandatory alcohol blackout surrounding the election. Of all the public notices directed at the residents of Santa Elena de Uairén, this was the one people took to heart.

The past months had been growing increasingly more frenetic. The Chavistas of Sta Elena wore the royal blue of the PPT party rather than the red of Chavez' own MVR, and in their zeal to dress each and every one of those "diez millones" of voters they claimed Chavez would win they set Sta Elena awash with free blue t-shirts. The image of two hands with splayed fingers—representing the ten million votes—stood white-on-blue on the backs of vendors, taxi drivers, construction workers and housewives.

The t-shirt only comes in an unflattering extra large, so I, vain, wear mine only when I go to bed.

The PPT was rallying heavily in the days leading up to the election, holding constant parades, shouting slogans ("Uh, ah, Chavez no se va!") and of course handing out t-shirts. All of us in line at the liquor store cheered them by.

The citizens of Sta Elena truly knew how to do politics, as I had seen three months earlier, when the city turned out in protest of the military's slaying of illegal miners at nearby La Paragua. A mob moved through town, blocking traffic and forcing all the shops to close. Liquor stores were still open, of course, though with their metal grates locked tight, prying cans out of the six-pack plastic to hand individually through the tiny windows. The mobs shut down the only two roads that leave town.

I walked through the northern blockade on the evening of the second day, wary at first, then relaxing to enjoy the music. People lounged on hard plastic lawnchairs around barbecues, and every thirty yards or so groups of young men gathered around the open trunks of muscle cars while the three-foot speakers in the back thumped out reggaetón. The normally deserted pincho stand by the Bodega de la Carne was sold out by 8:00.

They stayed like that for almost three days, pulling beer from the bottomless ice-chests and dancing to the clashing music from so many car-trunk speaker systems while juice, ice-cream and CD vendors wandered through the throng to make a killing.

The good citizens of Sta Elena certainly knew how to throw a political festival when the opportunity presented itself.

In the months leading up to the election, the fundamental difference that people perceived between Chavez and his rival, Manuel Rosales, became clear. "Viva Chavez" was spraypainted onto the walls of the invasion neighborhoods, whereas Rosales' slogan, "Atrévete a cambiar," ("dare to change") adorned the fusilages of private planes and the windows of the walled-in houses. Most people I talked with were disillusioned with Chavez after five years of him falling short of dangerously high promises, but I met no one who planned to change sides. "Soy chavista, pero..." began every conversation about Chavez. "I'm a Chavista, but..."

Everyone has been told to stay off the streets on Sunday, the day of the election, unless they're going to or from the voting booths. Public gatherings have been temporarily forbidden and the streets are crawling with 17-year-olds with AK-47's slung over their shoulders, so we sit up in our volunteer camp on the mountainside with our cases of Polar like Y2K fanatics wondering if the world is about to end.

What if Chavez loses? Both he and Rosales have promised not to quit without a fight. What if the margin of votes is close, and the election is contested? We're here in sleepy Sta Elena, where the worst that would happen is another impromptu fiesta, but by all accounts tensions are boiling in Caracas.

I have a flight to catch in ten days. What if they shut down the capitol city and I have to spend weeks, maybe months sipping rum and playing drums with our hippie neighbors, dancing salsa and singing karaoke with the workers at the volunteer camp, talking friendly politics with every vendor, clerk or bartender who asks me where I'm from and seems surprised when I say the United States.

What if I never had to leave here at all?

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