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The Quiet Revolution

Venezuelans experiment with participatory democracy.

By [ANDREW KENNIS](#)

Selling goods to passersby on the street, Jenny Caraballo describes her local communal council. “Some of our members are homemakers who want their community to be pretty,” Caraballo says while trying to make eye contact with potential clients in 23 de Enero, a barrio popular that is one of many rough areas in Caracas, Venezuela.

The balmy weather southwest of Caracas, in the state of Táchira, does not stop Pedro Hernandez, 77, from playing chess with his retired friends in San Cristóbal’s city square. “Before, the government didn’t help the people,” he says. “Now they give us benefits. “Now there is culture, dance and programs free to the public and organized by our communal council.” Hernandez does his part by organizing chess tournaments.

And in the picturesque mountain town of Merida, Alidio Sosa says: “The councils are a symbol of how the old parties are dead and won’t ever come back—the parties of the past never concerned themselves with the community.”

Hugo Chávez, Venezuela’s megalomaniac president who has spearheaded the country’s Bolivarian revolution and garnered so much attention, is not the only one shaking up the country’s political system. A community-based revolution is underway in Venezuela. Ordinary people all over are changing how their communities are governed.

In the past four years, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have been organizing tens of thousands of consejos comunales (communal councils). Each council is composed of about 150 families in urban areas, while in rural and indigenous areas, each council is composed of 20 and 10 families, respectively. The councils are involved in everything from road building and maintenance to cultural activities and events, housing improvements, and providing basic services like water and electricity—all while struggling for the official government recognition that provides the opportunity to get funding for their community projects.

Communal councils were modeled after participatory democracy in Kerala, India, and community budgeting practices pioneered in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In Kerala, citizens play an important role in conceiving and implementing development projects at the local level. Since 1989, Porto Alegre has successfully run a system of decentralized planning whereby citizens determine local spending priorities through a series of public meetings. Communal councils in Venezuela embody both of these municipal participatory reforms.

The councils are both Chávista and anti-Chávista; working-class and oligarchical. The former mayor of Carora, Julio Chávez, told Michael Albert of Z-Net and Greg Wilpert of Venezuela Analysis in September 2008:

The communal councils are an expression of the territory where people live, and within that area they are the natural leadership. In some communal councils, our candidates, ones supporting the revolution, were not elected, but instead anti-Chávistas were elected. In our area there is a communal council that belongs to the



Members of the 13 de Abril communal council, located in the worker residential district 23 de Enero in Caracas, deliberate over and plan community development projects. (Photo courtesy of Silvia Leindecker)

Communal councils are an effort to combat red tape and the corruption related to it. They are also the product of a long history of movement politics.

oligarchy, essentially. They aren't with us, but they have invited us to meetings where we discuss their concerns.

The paperwork required to start and maintain a council is one of the greatest obstacles to communal council organizing. Completion of a multi-step process, including conducting a census and numerous elections, is required. Despite these complexities, councils have taken on government bureaucracy by creating a participatory model of governance that bypasses large institutions and municipal officials.

Local officials and bureaucrats feel threatened by this growing form of self-governance, which is fueled by billions of dollars from the central government. Of the many national Bolivarian social projects, the communal councils have arguably become the most popular and successful innovations of the Chávez administration.

■ *Beyond bureaucracy*

Most of Venezuela's workforce is divided between an informal economy, in which people hawk consumer goods in the street, and the government agencies connected to the nationalized petroleum industry, which accounts for more than half of government revenue and about 90 percent of the country's exports. Given the large amount of funding state agencies receive based on petro-dollars and the under-employment outside the public sector, government bodies have strong incentives to prolong their own existence. This breeds an Orwellian bureaucracy of sorts, which roils the Venezuelan public.

Communal councils are an effort to combat Venezuela's bureaucratic red tape and the corruption related to it. But they are also the latest manifestation of Venezuela's long tradition of community activism and social struggle.

The councils were not immediately successful, given the challenges inherent to community organizing. The first attempt at participatory democratic reform was the 2001 institution of Bolivarian Circles. These neighborhood councils were largely viewed as electoral organizing arms of the Chávez administration.

Local Public Planning Councils (CLPPs) were next, but elected council leaders found it difficult to rub elbows with powerful public officials while representing districts which contained, in some cases, upwards of 1 million people. By 2005, most CLPPs were deadlocked and ineffective.

The third try has been the charm. Communal councils sprung up across the country in the wake of National Assembly legislation in November 2006. Their success is attributed to their more decentralized and democratic structure—each council is run by and serves a relatively small number of people.

Direct inspiration for the Law of Communal Councils was drawn from Cumaná, a coastal state capital located some 250 miles northeast of Caracas. In Cumaná, communal councils had been operating successfully because citizens were comfortable deliberating in small, community-oriented bodies. The Cumaná experience was translated into a national success story, as the number of officially sanctioned communal councils rose from about 21,000 in 2007 to 30,179 by 2009, with some 5,000 more slated for formation.

This organizing frenzy was accompanied by significant federal funding. Starting at \$1.5 billion in 2006, funding for communal councils increased to \$5 billion by 2007. That same year, laws governing the distribution of petroleum revenues were modified so that 50 percent of funds—the portion previously directed to state and municipal governments—went to communal councils.

Despite the abundance of financing, legislation limits each council to project spending caps of between about \$14,000 and \$28,000. The caps mean projects can do little more than pave a new road, so councils frequently depend on volunteer labor, a problem for impoverished communities. Still, councils are often able to rely on volunteers due to the councils' popularity. A lack of competitive contracts for council work has also been a source of criticism from opponents of the government.

■ *An 'alternative economy'?*

New laws passed by the National Assembly since November 2009 have helped councils expand their focus into the economic sphere. According to the legislation, councils should now promote new forms of "social property, based on the potentialities of their community," through a tax-exempt "social, popular, and alternative economy."

Since the councils were created in part to combat bureaucracy, some reforms aim to streamline council finances and prevent corruption. Financial management of the councils was transferred from communal banks to finance commissions with elected council administrators, and recall measures were instituted for council

spokespersons (elected citizens who manage the councils). Ostensibly, these measures grant more financial autonomy and independence from meddling local officials, who often feel threatened by or are in conflict with the councils.

In May 2010, about 15,000 elected spokespeople participated in workshops—conducted by the government’s Foundation for Development and Promotion of Communal Power—on how to implement the new reforms.

Socialist communes created through additional federal initiatives since last November represent an effort to strengthen councils and expand their scope into the economic realm. As of February 2010, more than 184 communes—each of which coordinates between various councils around the country—were being organized to help councils focus on “social-productive” projects and provide Venezuelans with access to cheaper goods. These projects include growing medicinal and agricultural plants in the coastal state of Miranda, and operating nonprofit arepa shops, which sell food in Caracas at half the market price. Other initiatives take advantage of cheap goods produced or distributed by certain communes.

■ *An experiment evolves*

“Before, neighborhood associations took on the responsibilities of many of the community’s needs,” says Caraballo, the community activist in Caracas. “Now, the communal council does much of the same work, but with the financial support of the government—giving us more resources to do the things we need to do.”

As with any experiment in participatory democracy, the councils are not perfect. Dedicated citizen activists are often overburdened with what arguably should be governmental responsibilities. In addition, much of Venezuela’s most important communal council work is being done by un- or under-employed volunteers often mired in poverty.

Others are concerned that citizens still lack a way, other than elected officials, to be part of higher-level government decisions that impact their lives. Some Venezuelans ask: Why can’t councils also have a say over foreign, macroeconomic and national policies that impact their communities?

Lofty pronouncements about communal councils from federal officials abound. Chávez himself has declared the councils to be “the great motors of the new era of the Revolution,” “a basic cell of the future society,” and “fundamental ... for revolutionary democracy.” Yet questions remain about the future role of councils in larger political and economic spheres.

If they continue to push for and realize the ambitious aim of assuming the powers of bloated, sometimes corrupt, bureaucracies, they could perhaps overtake local government’s function altogether.

Regardless of how they evolve, if local citizens control the future of the councils, they will surely remain an important part of the far-reaching political changes that have reshaped Venezuela during the last decade.

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