



# Venezuela: The Headlines You Missed in 2009

## VENEZUELA CELEBRATES 10 YEARS OF REFORM

The year 2009 [marked 10 years](#) since the Venezuelan people voted to endorse a new constitution that enshrined a variety of new rights and has helped shape the direction of the country since. The 1999 Constitution, written by an elected Constituent Assembly and ratified through a popular election, gave birth to the Bolivarian Revolution, a democratic and peaceful process of political, economic and social change in Venezuela.

### ***SINCE 1999...***

- ↓ Extreme poverty *fell* from 20.2 to 7.6 percent
- ↓ Household poverty *dropped* from 49 to 21 percent
- ↑ Social spending has averaged 17.5 percent of GDP
- ↑ Human Development Index ranking *rose*, 68 to 58
- ↑ Literacy *increased* from 93% to 96%

Since 1999, Venezuela's democratic system has been opened to the formerly excluded poor majorities, offering additional means to participate and new rights to exercise. Some 14 elections have been held in the 10 years since the Constitution took effect, including a recall referendum half-way through President Hugo Chávez's first term that marked the first time in Venezuela's history that the people were allowed to vote on whether their highest elected official could stay in office.

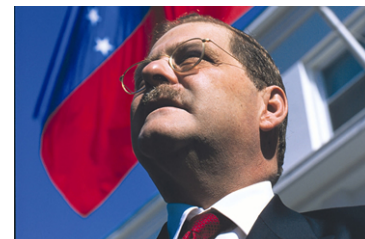
Venezuela has also seen [dramatic social gains](#) in the last 10 years. Extreme poverty fell from 20.2 percent in 1999 to 7.6 percent in 2008, while household poverty decreased from 49 percent in 1999 to 21 percent 10 ten years later. According to the "Social Panorama of Latin America 2009" report published by the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), Venezuela ranked second in the region behind only Argentina in terms of decreases in poverty and indigence between 2002 and 2008.

Inequality has decreased and according to the 2009 UN Human Development Index, Venezuela rose four places since 2008. These improvements in social indicators have been based on an increased emphasis on social rights – such as education, health and employment – enshrined in the 1999 Constitution and programs to promote them. Between 1988 and 1998, the year President Chávez took office, social spending stood at 9.5 percent of GDP. Since then, it has averaged 17.5 percent.

A key part of the changes in Venezuela have included a more diverse foreign policy aimed at integrating the region and promoting a multi-polar world. Venezuela has worked to establish political integration schemes such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), economic integration schemes such as the Bank of the South and energy integration schemes such as PetroCaribe as a means to promote regional cooperation and growth to better compete against other global powers.

## AMBASSADOR RETURNS TO WASHINGTON

In September 2008, a diplomatic dispute between the Bush administration and Venezuela caused the ambassadors of both countries to leave their posts.



In June 2009, both were returned. Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez's return to his post in Washington represents the first time in U.S. diplomatic history that an ambassador has returned after being recalled from his post. The move, which also allowed U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela Patrick Duddy to resume his post, was made as a means to re-establish relations that had been damaged through actions by the Bush administration.

In [an interview](#) with the *Washington Diplomat*, Ambassador Alvarez noted, "We are living in new times. We value the decision that allowed Ambassador Duddy to go back to Caracas, and me to return here. This tells you that when there's political will to move on, everything is possible."



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Ambassador Alvarez became Venezuela's chief envoy to the U.S. in 2003. He is currently the longest-serving Latin American ambassador in Washington, and travels widely through the U.S. to establish people-to-people ties between the U.S. and Venezuela.

### **REGION OPPOSES BASES IN COLOMBIA**

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When the U.S. and Colombia announced an agreement in July 2009 that would allow U.S. soldiers and intelligence officials to operate out of seven military bases, the region [came together](#) to oppose the move. In three emergency summits of UNASUR held from August to November, the countries of South America jointly expressed their concern with the agreement and the impact it would have on regional stability and the sovereignty of individual countries. Additionally, in November 2009 Argentina and Brazil issued a joint declaration expressing their opposition to the presence of foreign troops in the region.

Venezuela joined its regional partners in opposing the military agreement, which was formally signed on October 30. Venezuela, which shares a 1,400-mile-long border with Colombia, has long felt the impacts of Colombia's internal conflict, from the flow of millions of refugees to threats from paramilitary groups and drug traffickers. An intensified military strategy would further increase those impacts along the border. Moreover, even the U.S. Government Accountability Office has recognized the failure of the U.S.-sponsored Plan Colombia in stemming the production of trafficking of drugs, acts that would likely increase with further militarization within Colombia.

Additionally, public U.S. documents justifying the bases noted that they would be used for "full spectrum operations" against regional threats including "anti-U.S. governments," thus indicating that the bases would not be used simply to combat drugs and insurgent groups, as publicly claimed by the U.S. and Colombian government. Along with the March 2008 attack by Colombian forces on Ecuadorian territory – a blatant and unprovoked violation of territorial sovereignty – the countries of the region felt clear concern for stability, peace and the possibility of future U.S. military deployments in South America.

In an [op-ed](#) published by *Foreign Policy* on December 8, 2009, Ambassador Alvarez wrote of the agreement: "This agreement's vague provisions and questionable motivations threaten regional stability and territorial sovereignty, alter the region's military balance, and threaten to push more of the violence and drug trafficking that is endemic to Colombia's conflict across its borders."

### **'EL SISTEMA' ENJOYS NEW SUCCESSES**

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Venezuela's state-sponsored system of youth orchestras and music education, known as "El Sistema," has garnered global respect and emulation since it started in the late 1970s. In 2009, though, "El Sistema" gained two significant achievements.



In October 2009, Gustavo Dudamel, a 28-year-old conductor and product of "El Sistema," [began his tenure](#) as director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Dudamel, called a "shaggy-haired prodigy" in a CBS *60 Minutes* interview, has been celebrated as one of the world's most passionate and exciting young conductors. In 2008, he toured the U.S. with the Simon Bolivar National Youth Orchestra with the support of CITGO, the Venezuelan-owned but U.S.-based oil corporation, and the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington.

In November 2009, Jose Antonio Abreu, who founded "El Sistema," [received an \*Honoris Causa\* award](#) at the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Latin Grammy Awards for his work developing the youth orchestra system and promoting music education in Venezuela and around the world. Abreu has been hailed as a visionary, has served as a UNESCO Special Ambassador and has received numerous awards for his musical endeavors in Venezuela.



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“El Sistema” was founded in 1975 and has enjoyed public support from a variety of Venezuelan governments. President Hugo Chávez has been the program’s most active supporter, though, pledging additional resources to help it attract more children. In 2007, President Chávez announced his intention to increase funding for the youth orchestras so that they could expand in size from 250,000 to 1 million participants. He has also publicly recognized the value of “El Sistema” not only in promoting culture, but also in helping children escape poverty and social exclusion.

### **PRESIDENT CHAVEZ SPEAKS TO LARRY KING**

During his visit to the United Nations in New York from September 22-24, President Hugo Chávez appeared on CNN’s *Larry King Live*. During the hour-long interview, President Chávez addressed a number of issues, from Venezuela’s relationship to Iran to his expectation for a new relationship with U.S. President Barack Obama.

On relations with the U.S. government, President Chávez stressed the importance of respect while noting that he had maintained good links to the U.S. government during the administration of President Bill Clinton. “We want relations based on respect – relations of peoples where we are respected,” he said.

In that sense, he added, “There is an Obama that yesterday spoke of peace, of promoting peace as one of the main pillars of his foreign policy. I accept that call, and we join in Obama’s call. But there is another Obama, the one who only recently accepted the installation of seven U.S. bases in Colombia, and in that sense that is another Obama, the Obama of war, of using force and military presence and equipment and technology of war against our people. See? There are two Obamas; I want the Obama of peace, to him I extended my hand and that is the Obama that we truly want and that world needs, a true leader that promotes peace and understanding in the world.”

He also stressed that while Iran and Venezuela had developed close commercial, cultural and scientific relations, he did not agree with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s opinions on the Holocaust. President Chávez noted that while he had disagreements with Israel’s government, he respected the Jewish people. “In Venezuela there are many Jews and they are my friends; I have gone with them to pray, respecting their beliefs just as I do Muslims.”

President Chávez also defended the right of all countries to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, expressed his desire for peace in Colombia and asked the UN to help work towards it. He also countered claims of excessive spending on arms in Venezuela and called on the countries of the developed world to more aggressively fight

climate change.

In speaking of his tenure in as Venezuela’s president, he spoke of the gains of the Bolivarian Revolution: “When I became president, poverty in Venezuela was almost 60 percent. Today, it’s below 30. We met the [UN Millennium Development Goals]. Extreme poverty was 24 percent, now it’s seven percent, and it keeps on going down. Unemployment was close to 20 percent. Now it’s close to six percent, better than the U.S. We have improved employment...and child mortality has improved. Venezuela has changed in a dramatic fashion.”

### **SOCIAL SPENDING REMAINS A PRIORITY**

While the global economic downturn has affected most countries around the world and forced them to trim budgets and limit expenditures, Venezuela is on track to maintain social spending as a vital government priority in 2010.

The 2010 budget approved by Venezuela’s National Assembly directs 46 percent of all spending to human needs such as public education, social development, healthcare, food security and others. The budget, which was set on economic growth of 0.5 percent and oil prices of \$40 a barrel, allocates \$74 billion to social spending.

### **OP-EDS BY AMBASSADOR ALVAREZ**

#### [H Fighting Terrorism in South Florida](#)

*Ft. Myers News-Press*

November 4, 2009

#### [HA Step Backward for the Hemisphere](#)

*The Hill*

November 11, 2009

#### [HA Bad Deal](#)

*Foreign Policy*

December 8, 2009



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Of that amount, \$13 billion will go to public education, \$9 billion to social security, \$6 billion to healthcare and \$3 billion to social development and participation.

According to Rodrigo Cabezas, Venezuela's former Minister of Economy and Finance, social spending as a percentage of the country's budget has risen dramatically in the last 10 years, leading to a number of social advances. Prior to President Chávez's election, social spending averaged 14 percent of the budget, while after his election it has increased to 42 percent of the budget.

### **WOMEN SEE AN INCREASED ROLE**

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Over the course of the last 10 years, women in Venezuela have grown to play increasingly important roles in the country's political, economic and social development. The roles played by women – which range from community activists to high government officials – have been facilitated by the 1999 Constitution, which strongly emphasizes gender equality, and new initiatives to more broadly incorporate women in all sectors of life.

Currently, four of Venezuela's five branches of government are led by women, an unprecedented achievement in the country's political history. Cilia Flores serves as president of the National Assembly, Tibisay Lucena as president of the National Electoral Council, Luisa Estrella Morales as president of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice and Luiza Ortega as Venezuela's Attorney General.

Additionally, new institutions created in Venezuela over the last decade to address women's issues include the Ministry of People's Power for Women and Gender Equality, the National Institute of Women, the Inter-Governmental Commission on the Prevention of Violence Against Women and the Bank of the Woman. At the World Conference on Actions Against Gender-Based Violence that took place in April 2009, Winnie Byanyima, director of the Gender Team of the UN Development Program (UNDP), said of Venezuela's advances: "Venezuela has taken the reins of institutional mechanism to help women progress." While more women still remain to be elected to public office, both at the federal and local level, in the November 2008 municipal elections the number of female mayors tripled, reaching 19 percent of all mayors in Venezuela.

In the social realm, in 2006 the Venezuelan government initiated the "Mothers of the Slum" social mission, which seeks to help housewives who find themselves in a state of poverty by offering them financial assistance equal to 60 to 80 percent of the minimum wage.

María del Mar Alvarez, a prominent women's rights activist and the former National Defender of Women's Rights, noted, "In this revolution women have participated extraordinarily. We have achieved a Constitution that is a model for the world for justice and equality. It has empowered them. Usually feminism caters to the upper and middle classes. However, this revolution has woken women up and feminism is reaching the popular sectors. Now all women know they have the right to participate."

### **ADVANCES MADE IN FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS**

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Throughout 2009, Venezuela made significant advances in the fight against the production, consumption and trafficking of illegal drugs.

#### ***The Fight Against Drugs in 2009...***

- Seizures of drugs increased from 54 to 60 tons
- \$260 million spent on radars to detect drug flights
- Close to 4,500 people detained for drug crimes
- 50 anti-drug international cooperation agreements

In 2009, Venezuela seized 60 tons of illegal drugs, an *increase* from the 54 tons seized in 2008. This advance continues a trend in Venezuela. According to a 2009 report of the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Venezuela ranks second in South America, behind only Colombia, in drug seizures. During 2002-2004, 125 tons of drugs were seized, while 172.8 were seized during 2006-2008, an increase of 47.8 tons, or 38.2 percent.

From January to September 2009, the Venezuelan government detained 4,490 individuals for crimes related to the trafficking of drugs. Of this number, 4,219 were Venezuelan citizens and 271 were citizens of other countries. Due to the extensive cooperation that exists between Venezuela and other countries on combating

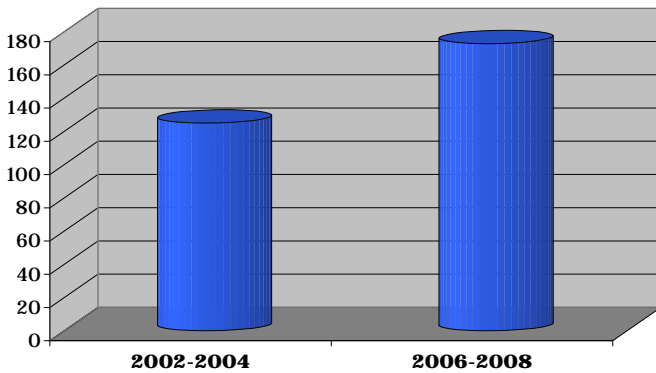


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drug trafficking, 20 foreign nationals were extradited through August 2009. Of those, 10 were Colombians.

By November 2008, Venezuela had installed ten Chinese-made radar stations to track and intercept planes carrying illegal drugs. Through 2009, the investment in these radars totaled \$260 million. During the first months of 2009, 26 planes were seized. In addition to monitoring airspace, Venezuelan authorities took action against illicit landing strips in isolated areas used by small planes carrying drugs. Over 223 of these landing strips were destroyed in 2008.

**Average Drug Seizures (Tons)**



In July 2009 the Venezuelan government began using special drug incinerators to dispose of seized drugs. The incinerators employ advanced technology to limit the production of toxic fumes caused by the burning of illegal drugs and have been approved for use by the World Health Organization (WHO). "Venezuela is the first country in the world with an expanded capacity of incinerators for illegal drugs," said the Ministry of Interior and Justice.

As part of Venezuela's comprehensive anti-drug efforts, in September 2009 the National Anti-Drug Office announced the creation of a National Anti-Drug Fund to help finance drug prevention programs throughout Venezuela. The fund will begin operations in early 2010.

In August and September of 2008, Venezuela engaged in joint exercises with the militaries of Brazil and the Netherlands to improve monitoring of airspace and the Caribbean. Through 2009, Venezuela has signed 50 international anti-drug cooperation agreements. It also cooperates with regional partners and takes part in the OAS's Inter-American Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse (CICAD).

## FOURTH YEAR FOR HEATING OIL PROGRAM

The [CITGO-Venezuela Heating Oil Program](#) entered its fourth year in 2009, expanding to reach more individuals and communities in more states throughout the U.S. The program, which provides heating oil at discounted rates to individuals and communities in need, started in 2005 after the disaster of Hurricane Katrina. That year, it served 181,000 households and hundreds of homeless shelters in eight states.



In 2009, the program was expanded to serve 202,000 households, 245 homeless shelters and 250 Native American communities in 25 states and the District of Columbia. Some 49 million gallons of discounted heating oil were distributed. In a letter to Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez, the executive leadership of the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, which represents 170 indigenous groups, wrote that the CITGO-Venezuela Heating Oil Program "freed our people from having to choose between paying their heating bills and buying food and medicine for their children."

CITGO remains the sole U.S.-based corporation to participate in a program of this sort. It will continue in 2010.

## SATELLITE ENTERS FIRST YEAR OF SERVICE

In October 2008 the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, with the help of the People's Republic of China, launched its first satellite into orbit. In January 2009, official control of the satellite was turned over to Venezuela.

The satellite, VENESAT-1 or the "Simon Bolivar Satellite," will remain in operation for 15 years and will serve a variety of telecommunications needs in Venezuela and Latin America, including connectivity and telephone and television transmissions. By 2010 it will also start being used for telemedicine in a number of developing countries.

The satellite will aid in the development of technologies and services that were in the past limited to developed



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countries. Before its launch, Venezuela was dependent on U.S. satellites and technologies for services that it can now provide for itself and offer to other countries of Latin America. Uruguay, which is allowing the satellite to orbit in its airspace, has access to 10 percent of the satellite's capacity.

### VENEZUELA COMBATS CLIMATE CHANGE

Venezuela joined with the other countries of the world in Copenhagen, Denmark in December 2009 to discuss how to move forward in combating climate change. Venezuela, which is a signatory to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, joined together with Bolivia, Cuba and other countries of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA) to demand that industrialized countries cut carbon dioxide emissions by 50 percent relative to 1990 levels. In a [speech](#) during the conference, Venezuela also argued that any global resolution should draw upon the work and goals of the Kyoto Protocol.

Venezuela has long argued that the fight against climate change requires “common, yet differentiated responsibilities,” indicating that the developed countries responsible for the bulk of the world's carbon dioxide emissions should enact stricter cuts and help developing countries adopt cleaner technologies. In a speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2009, President Chávez also argued that climate change has been driven by hyper-consumption. “We're doing away with the planet, we need to see that and be conscious of it and take action. Now, what is the fundamental cause of such pollution? Hyper-consumption. We're consuming the world's oil and gas reserves that accumulated over thousands of years, we're consuming them all in a century, maybe less than a century.”

Though Venezuela is an oil producer, it produces very little carbon dioxide (only .46 percent of global emissions) and has taken a number of steps to combat climate change. Over 70 percent of Venezuela's electricity comes from hydro-electric sources, and the forests and jungles that cover 54 percent of the country's territory serve to sequester large amounts of carbon dioxide. Venezuela has also undertaken projects to replace traditional incandescent light bulbs with energy-efficient bulbs, reforest logged areas and construct a better national public transit network.

### CULTURAL EVENTS PROMOTE VENEZUELA

Throughout 2009, Venezuelan culture and heritage was on full display throughout the U.S. as the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Washington hosted events highlighting music, art and food.



In April 2009, the embassy and CITGO Corporation worked to bring the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, part of 'El Sistema,' and conductor Gustavo Dudamel to the U.S. for a brief tour. They performed to full houses in Houston, Washington, D.C. and Chicago. During the summer months, Venezuelan group *Los Maestros del Joropo Oriental* appeared at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C. Additionally, the Smithsonian Folkways record label released their album “[Y Que Viva Venezuela!](#),” a collection of traditional eastern Venezuelan folk music. The Afro-Venezuelan drumming group *Cuero, Madera y Costa* also performed at the Folklife Festival.

*Los Maestros del Joropo Oriental* also performed during the embassy's “Venezuelan Sounds” series, which was sponsored by Chevron. Traditional toy-maker Mario Calderon and violinist Eddy Marcano were highlighted in separate events hosted by the embassy, as were various films from La Ville del Cine, a new production facility in Venezuela for independent movies.

The embassy also hosted a number of chocolate tastings – Venezuela produces the cacao that is used in the world's finest chocolates – and participated in the Passport D.C. program, during which visitors were able to tour the official residence of the ambassador of Venezuela in Washington, D.C.

**For more information visit our website:**

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