

The Juan Carlos-Chavez Spat

Royal Incident Signals Arrival of Latin America's 'Underdog' Class

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WASHINGTON -- King Juan Carlos of Spain made a lot of people happy when he recently told Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to shut up. Yet to many in the Latin American underclass, the incident was proof that, politically, they had finally arrived.

Even Chavez-haters acknowledge that he is a folk hero to many in Venezuela and beyond because they see him as a manifestation of their own empowerment. That it was a king and not the president of some other country telling Chavez to keep quiet amplified a sense of satisfaction among Chavez followers -- because of the colonial overtones and the history of imperial Spain in the region.

And so the incident provides an excellent starting point to talk about the new social mobilization of Latin America's poor. Latin American discontent has been around for a long time. But there is an important distinction today. When social movements of the past began to make demands of Latin American governments, the typical response was suppression by various means -- imprisonment, execution, isolation. Some of these groups believed that the only way of resolving their grievances was by arming themselves to fight their way to revolutionary change.

Latin America's social movements of today are effective because democracy has become so consolidated in the region that their concerns can no longer be ignored or easily dismissed, much less silenced. Now states believe they have to accommodate these concerns and promote consensus or risk losing popular support and even be forced out of office. In Argentina, for instance, *los piqueteros*, a movement of unemployed workers that grew in strength following the country's 2001 economic collapse, have successfully pressured the state to give them welfare subsidies to spread among members. Had this movement emerged 15 years earlier and not in 1995, it might well have met another, and violent, fate.

Not that long ago, groups such as the *piqueteros* would have been seen as an undesirable development, putting unwelcome pressure on young democracies. But persistent economic inequality and social exclusion, despite more than two decades of democracy and a decade of market reforms, have forced a reassessment of those social movements -- less as a problem and more as a solution.

Even in Washington, which historically has sided with stability, usually at the expense of the oppressed in Latin America, President Bush has referred to the desires of groups leading the "revolution in expectations" as "legitimate demands." In a recent report, the Inter-American Development Bank waxed optimistic about social mobilization as a necessary agent of change -- despite its potential to "aggravate social conflict and complicate democratic governance."

The ultimate manifestation of Latin America's social transformation has been the rise of indigenous movements. In countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador, individuals once deemed inferior to Spanish or other European descendants have mobilized in recent years to successfully reverse policies, bring down governments and elect native candidates to office, including the presidency.

Now, those countries in which the once subjugated have come to power will put to a test the maturity of Latin American democracy. The challenge is whether the grass-roots uprisings will "lead to an enduring, more complete inclusion in a political and social sense, reducing discrimination and inequalities" or to new forms of exclusion, as Mark Payne, one of the authors of the IDB report, put it in an interview.

Chavez, while not a true example of an indigenous leader, draws his popular support from Venezuelans previously oppressed -- namely, the country's poor in an oil-rich land. He has unquestionably used that power in many instances to right certain historical wrongs. But he has also taken to harassing or suppressing opponents. As David Smolansky, a 22-year-old journalism student and spokesman for the new student movement in Venezuela told me, "Here in Venezuela we are getting to the point that whoever does not concur with his (Chavez's socialist) ideas is a ... traitor" and will be excluded from participating in political life.

One hopes that all democratic leaders, indigenous or not, will find a path to greater inclusion rather than going down the road well worn by previous oppressive regimes. For the time being, though, it's not such a bad thing -- perhaps it is even a measure of democracy's success -- that there were some who saw a victory for the "underdog" in the Juan Carlos-Chavez incident. After all, it seems wholly appropriate to celebrate that a Spanish royal family's bloodlines are ever more diluted among Latin America's ruling class.