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Fighting Socialism In Venezuela: The Work Of A Heroic Think Tank

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The work of free-market think tanks in the United States share many things in common with the work of other non-profits. One major concern is to obtain sufficient resources to be successful in achieving results. In some countries, however, those who work and help think tanks have another set of concerns. They need to worry about their personal safety, their freedoms, and even the possible loss of all their assets and be forced to leave their countries. That is the plight of [CEDICE Libertad](#) and those who work for freedom-oriented non-profits in Venezuela.

In Venezuela, the harassment by government has lasted more than 15 years. It is a major accomplishment for those who promote the values of the free society to subsist under such conditions. To be able to excel is heroic and almost miraculous. Yet, CEDICE endured. The latest ranking of think tanks, prepared by the [University of Pennsylvania](#), ranked them as the top free-market think tank in Latin America. Last week they celebrated their 30th anniversary at the largest convention hall and theater in the Chacao district, one of the few areas where the national government can't terrorize the opposition into silence and submission. So far there have been 41 people killed, 70 cases of torture, and close to 100 still in prison.

In 1999, just before the 15th anniversary of CEDICE, the late president [Hugo Chávez](#) warned those who were planning to attend from abroad, "We are waiting for you with lead." This did not deter the guests, especially Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa, who has attended all major anniversary events as the star attraction. He was there in 1999 when José Vicente Rangel, foreign minister, and a leading socialist operator and chieftain, delivered the opening lecture. In its attempt to consolidate power, the architects of this 21st century socialism hid their true intentions with duplicitous strategies. Attending a CEDICE event was one of them.

Since then there has been constant harassment of donors and trustees. I have the privilege of knowing many of them for over 30 years. The spirit, courage, and commitment of those who kept the fight (the large majority) is inspiring. Sharing the struggle with the staff of the think tank instilled a special character and created a special bond among them. Many had to go into exile.

The methods employed by the government to weaken support are varied. One of the founding members of CEDICE has a large agricultural operation on land where the property title is centuries old—predating independence—and the judicial agents of the regime argue that those lands should revert to the state. The legal battle continues. Another tactic is to manipulate regulations and price controls to disturb the operations of major companies owned by supporters of the think tank. This was followed by paving the way for cronies, mostly local but sometimes foreign, to buy the weakened enterprises. Sometimes the families cave. CEDICE's chairman, Rafael Alfonzo Hernández was asked by family shareholders to relinquish his CEO role in his company. They feared that his high profile fighting socialist policies was endangering the survival of the enterprise.

A new term appeared in Venezuela: Boligarchs. It refers to the old and new “capitalists” who sell their souls and fill their pockets with the favors of the Bolivarian government. When their cronyism began to be disclosed, they countered with lawsuits “left and right.” I use this cliché knowingly because the Boligarchs even hired noted U.S. lawyers with right-wing credentials.

Just a week before the 30th anniversary celebration, Congressman Juan Carlos Alemán, issued a formal accusation to the attorney general's office against a short list of people that included the current president and vice president of the board of CEDICE in Venezuela, as well as pro-freedom politicians Maria Corina Machado and youth leader Cesar Briceño.

What allowed CEDICE to achieve success despite these attacks? These are four main factors:

- **Relying on extremely principled leaders.** The general manager of the think tank, Rocio Guijarro, is a single mom who joined the think tank at its founding, fresh after college. She is one of the great heroes of civilized life in Venezuela and the Americas. Ms. Guijarro also suffered indictments, but benefited from the loyalty of her admirable board members and [international](#) friends.
- **Have a sufficient large base of donors and supporters.** From the beginning, CEDICE was not the product of a tycoon or powerful group or foreign foundation. It will be difficult for other think tanks facing daunting challenges in territories such as Russia, Belorussia, and most of the Middle East and Africa, to replicate the heroic record of CEDICE. In most countries, large donors seldom join with others in causes they do not completely control. When one major donor decides to create and play a major role in a think tank, few others join them. Any major harassment by government to his or her business operations can weaken the think tank forever.
- **Develop strong relationships with power players and networks that are beyond the reach of the local government.** [Atlas](#) and [Cato](#) from the USA; [Caminos de Libertad](#) and [RELIAL](#), based in Mexico; [FIL](#) and [FAES](#) headquartered in Spain; [Friedrich Naumann Foundation](#) from Germany; and think tanks with international projection such as [Fundación para el Progreso](#) in Chile, and [Fundación Libertad](#) in Argentina have been old and new loyal partners of CEDICE. Each of these organizations provides different types of support, from funds, to human capital, high level political connections, international media exposure, and training for the youth. They were all present last week not only in the conference hall but also in universities, media outlets, and on the streets of Caracas.

- **Increase the scope of the programs of the think tank in order to have a wide support among the local forces of civil society.** During the past three decades, the board and staff of CEDICE have played a relevant part in efforts that go beyond free markets. These include: a leadership institute, several student groups, joining forces with Transparency International against corruption, and strong relationships with religious leaders from different faiths. As in most major celebrations, the 30th anniversary of CEDICE started with an ecumenical service, seeking wisdom and spiritual strength to continue working for liberty.

CEDICE, like other free-market think tanks, focuses on ideas, education and policy proposals, and stays away from partisan politics. The most courageous and principled politicians—such as the above mentioned Maria Corina Machado, as well as Antonio Ledezma and Leopoldo López, now a political prisoner—each in their own way, take the work of CEDICE to wider audiences. When he was detained, Leopoldo López was wearing a T-shirt with the inscription “the one who gets tired loses” popular among marathon runners. The slogan became popular among the opposition. Luckily, I did not see any tired player in the CEDICE orchestra.

Chávez is gone. CEDICE Libertad is still here. Chávez ideology continues to create poverty and drive some of the best of Venezuelans abroad. CEDICE is the Venezuelan producer, bank, and disseminator of the ideas that one day will truly liberate their country. Their work for freedom during these three decades should inspire free-market think tanks across the globe.

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