

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

## Robin Beres: Venezuela reveals the ugly truths about socialism

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For most Americans basking in the warmth of their well-heated homes, a rapidly improving economy, and — despite the claims of the left — a stable, democratic government, it is nearly impossible to fathom the depth of chaos and suffering that are taking place in Venezuela. But for those of us who actively participated in the Cold War, we've seen these sad, sorry results of socialism before.

And knowing that makes it so absurd to hear, according to a survey by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, more millennials (44 percent) would prefer to live under socialism than capitalism (42 percent). And 7 percent want to live under communism.

It's ignorant, but can these young adults really be blamed when they hear lovable old Bernie Sanders gush over how wonderful socialism is? Maybe it's all they know. They grew up during a prolonged recession and sluggish recovery hampered by onerous regulations and high taxes. Many witnessed out-of-work parents become reliant upon social services and entitlements.

But if you want to see real socialism in action, look at Venezuela.

The nation is beset by mass protests, stolen elections, rampant crime and murder, and severe medical and food shortages.

This past Christmas, most Venezuelan children didn't ask for toys: instead they begged Santa for something to fill their stomachs. Hundreds of thousands are suffering — 70 percent of the population lives in poverty. There is little work to be had. City streets are unlit at night and dangerous all day long.

Last year, in its annual Index of Economic Freedom, the Heritage Foundation placed Venezuela 179th out 180 nations. The Cato Institute ranked it No. 1 on its World Misery Index. The Venezuelan government's confiscation of private property, blatant disregard for the rule of law, and severely mismanaged monetary policies and price manipulations have sent the economy into free fall.

Venezuelan currency lost 97 percent of its value in 2017. Triple-digit inflation rates are expected to top 2,000 percent in 2018. The country is so deeply in debt that pharmaceutical companies are no longer selling it medical supplies.

Nearly 95 percent of all medicine once available can no longer be obtained. The situation is so dire that the health minister recently asked drug manufacturers if they would accept gold and diamonds in exchange for the \$5 billion they are owed.

Hospitals have no medicine and many have no fresh water, cleaning supplies, or unused bandages. Starvation is entrenched. The average Venezuelan citizen has lost 19 pounds. Infants are dying from malnutrition.

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**The situation is** all the more tragic because it was so preventable.

Venezuela was once the wealthiest nation in Latin America. What happened? Chavism happened. During the 14 years that Hugo Chavez served as president, he attempted to institute what he termed “21st century socialism.”

According to Chavez, it would be a form of socialism “based in solidarity, in fraternity, in love, in justice, in liberty, and in equality.” Instead, it became an economic disaster.

When Chavez was elected in 1999, he nationalized the oil companies. It was the beginning of a global oil boom and Venezuela was sitting on top of the world’s largest oil reserves. For several years, so much revenue poured in from oil sales that the government completely neglected other industries. And Chavez’s government spent those revenues hand over fist.

In addition, it placed price controls on almost everything and fixed the exchange rate on its currency. And things worked pretty well until the price of oil dropped. Then the state couldn’t produce enough oil to pay the bills.

With little money in reserve, the country quickly blew through what funds it had. In November of last year, Venezuela defaulted on two bond payments. There is little money now to import food or medicine. Citizens wait hours in long lines to purchase whatever sustenance or drugs they can get their hands on.

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**Chavez died** in 2013. The current president, Nicolas Maduro, has exercised increasingly severe authoritarian control. He has brutally clamped down on protests. Hundreds have been injured and scores have been killed.

In May 2017, Maduro had his stacked Supreme Court declare the Venezuelan congress, the nation’s last opposition-controlled institution, defunct and its powers invalid. Despite that, last Friday the congress defiantly selected a new leader, 73-year-old Omar Barboza. He is pushing for talks with Maduro’s government and has urged a fair and open vote in the upcoming 2018 elections.

Admirable — but there is little chance of that happening. Maduro isn’t going to relinquish control because of a silly election. And although it is called the opposition, in truth the members of the congress are only a little less socialist than Maduro.

But there are young people leading the fight for freedom. They despise socialism and yearn for true democracy and free markets. They call themselves “la resistencia.” Maduro’s goons have cracked down on them, some have been killed, and yet they continue their struggle. Pray for them.

Every human should have the freedom to control his own life, labor, and property. Economic freedom allows individuals to work, produce, and consume as they please. It is the very

antithesis of socialism. And it is largely because of free markets and economic freedoms that today less than 10 percent of humans live in extreme poverty.

That's why it's so disturbing to realize even as the youth of Venezuela resist socialism, in the U.S. the trend is going the other way. Recent surveys indicate that nearly 60 percent of America's 18- to 26-year-olds think socialism is the "most compassionate system" of governance.

Tell that to the people of Venezuela.