



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AS REVOLUTIONARY PROTAGONISTS

Key Facts & Figures

- **Over 500,000 indigenous people** inhabit Venezuela (~2.2 % of the national population), representing more than 30 different ethnic groups.
- For the first time in Venezuelan history a **whole chapter of the Constitution** is dedicated to the rights of indigenous peoples.
- The 1999 Constitution was the first ever to require that the **National Assembly**, Venezuela's lawmaking body include indigenous representatives.
- **A People's Ministry for Indigenous Peoples** was launched in 2007, headed by a Yekuana indigenous woman from the Amazon and 8 indigenous deputy-ministers.
- **39 indigenous languages** share with Spanish the status of official languages in Venezuela.
- 132,000 indigenous people, from 30 different ethnic groups have been assisted in more than **200 special medical plans during the year 2008**. The communities have been provided with medical equipment benefiting over 60,000 indigenous people in more than 2,500 communities.
- **Indigenous Health Offices** employing bilingual and intercultural assistants were installed in 12 national hospitals.
- **6 Shamanic Centers** specializing in traditional indigenous medicines have been launched to benefit more than 20,000 indigenous people.
- **81,000 indigenous** students graduated from Mission Robinson II (a special primary elementary education programme).
- Indigenous communities have received formal titles to **more than 900,000 hectares of land**.
- 2,000 indigenous students have received **stipends for advanced education** during the year 2008.
- Through **Mission Identity** almost 274,000 indigenous persons have receive national IDs.

The term “indigenous peoples” has become a broadly used expression when referring to a country’s original inhabitants. While we are all “original inhabitants” of particular places, there is more to this term when used in the Latin American context, as it is charged with a particular historical and socio-cultural reality. In Venezuela, indigenous citizens are descendants of ancestral inhabitants who have preserved certain elements of a distinct way of life, who identify themselves as indigenous peoples and who are identified by their communities as such.¹ Since the beginnings of the European colonial project in the Americas,

indigenous peoples, not only in Venezuela but all over the continent, have been faced with grave injustices. The current government has made huge efforts to repay this historical debt. For the first time in the history of the country, indigenous peoples are recognised as important actors in the local and national political arena. Furthermore, their enormous socio-cultural contribution is being celebrated as a fundamental pillar that defines Venezuelan identity today.



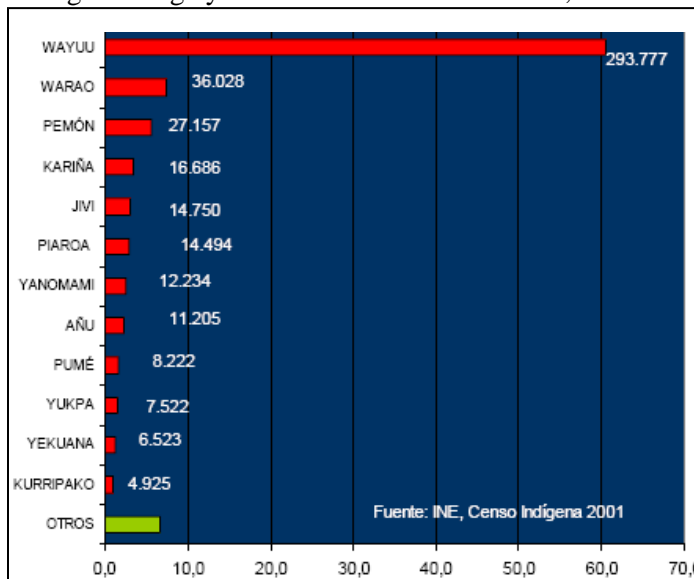
Who are the various indigenous peoples in Venezuela?

Talking about “the” Venezuelan indigenous peoples as if they were a homogenous group is highly misleading. On the contrary, the country today takes pride in praising its largely diverse indigenous

population, with its heterogeneous linguistic, cultural and socio-political background.

According to census data, by 2001 there were 534,816² indigenous people in Venezuela, representing about 2.2 % of the national population and pertaining to more than 30 different ethnic groups³. The

Zulia State is the one with the largest number of indigenous persons in absolute terms (333,058), as it hosts the most numerous indigenous group in Venezuela – the Wayuu people (293,777). The Wayuu inhabit the Northwestern part of Venezuela, including the rather desert-like peninsula “La Guajira”. The State of Amazonas, however, is the one with the largest number of indigenous persons in relative terms (50.6% of the population in that State is indigenous). The Amazon region is home to a diverse number of indigenous groups, such as the Piaroa (~14,500), the Yanomami (~12,000) or the Guajibos (~14,700).⁴ Today, only about 1/3 of indigenous peoples in Venezuela actually live in their traditional territory.



“Venezuela used to regard its indigenous people[s] contemptuously, but President Hugo Chávez set up a constitution that respects their wishes and their ownership of land. He promised, and has delivered.”
[Le Monde Diplomatique]

Historical Glimpse

Since the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, the lives of indigenous peoples all over the continent have been very much affected, unfortunately though, more negatively than positively. Slavery, forced work, diseases and massacres perpetrated

by Conquistadores dramatically decimated the indigenous population, a situation that was emblematic for the colonial period. Scholars argue that in Venezuela, independence in the early 19th century only made things worse, as the Catholic missionaries which lent indigenous peoples some measure of protection, disappeared.⁵

Furthermore, the new governments throughout the 19th century had no policy for indigenous peoples, but rather pushed them out of the center, towards the frontiers of the state.⁶ Indigenous leaders like Guaicapuro led resistance movements against European intrusions onto their lands, while western penetration pushed them further to the margins.⁷ The 20th century did not bring much improvement either. Governments were convinced that the best solution to deal with the “indigenous problem” would be to assimilate indigenous peoples into a mainstream national culture that looked down at its indigenous heritage and cherished its European roots. Indigenous peoples were seen as an obstacle on the way to modernity, their rights as Venezuelan citizens were spurned and their needs neglected.



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The Venezuela Information Office reports for example of the failure of the Carlos Andres Perez administration to provide proper medical services to Warao Indigenous people in the northeastern Delta Region who suffered an outbreak of cholera in the early 1990s. "Not only were the Warao denied access to health care, and thus not treated as full citizens, they were also blamed by the government for the spread of cholera"⁸. Five hundred years after the arrival of the Conquistadores and the beginning of one of the most dreadful genocides of history, the impoverished and segregated situation endured by the Indigenous communities in Venezuela seemed to have changed very little. On the eve of the 21st century, the Indigenous communities actively supported a revolutionary political alternative that has opened the way for their revalorization and empowerment.

National Legal Guaranties

With the ratification of the 1999 constitution indigenous peoples celebrated their first significant political victory. Their struggle for political rights, however, had started years before that. In 1989, the diverse indigenous peoples formed the Venezuelan National Indian Council (*Consejo Nacional Indio de Venezuela*, CONIVE). Former President of that organization and now Minister of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples, Nicia Maldonado, (a Yekuana indigenous leader from the Amazon region), recalls that the CONIVE was born as a popular movement in the context of the *Caracazo* riots in 1989 against the government's neoliberal reforms.⁹ Indigenous peoples saw the need to protect their lands and to defend indigenous sovereignty against rampant industrial and commercial development.

Le Monde Diplomatique reported in 2007 that "Things changed when Chávez was elected in 1998. Proud of his Pumé grandmother, he set

himself up as champion of the indigenous peoples. While still a candidate he promised to "repay this historic debt" owed by the state and carried it through when he set up the new Bolivarian Constituent Assembly in 1999."¹⁰ In fact, three indigenous representatives took part in the constitutional assembly and helped draft the section on indigenous rights.

The result speaks for itself!

The preamble of the **1999 Constitution** makes clear that the Venezuelan nation is a multicultural and multiethnic society. For the first time in the constitutional history of Venezuela a whole chapter is dedicated to indigenous peoples (Chapter VIII, "The Rights of Indigenous Peoples"), stipulating that the "State recognizes the existence of native peoples and communities, their social, political and economic organization, their cultures, practices and customs, languages and religions, as well as their habitat and original rights to the lands they ancestrally and traditionally occupy, and which are necessary to develop and guarantee their way of life."

Constitutional guaranties also include in Article 121 the indigenous peoples' "right to their own education, and an education system of an intercultural and bilingual nature, taking into account their special social and cultural characteristics, values and traditions."



Nicia Maldonado, Venezuelan Minister of Peoples Power for Indigenous Peoples

Furthermore, the 1999 Constitution was the first ever to require that the National Assembly, Venezuela's lawmaking body, include indigenous representatives. Like the other 164 members of the **National Assembly**, **three indigenous representatives** are elected through a popular vote among their constituencies. Noelí Pocaterra, a Wayuu indigenous woman, and lifelong activist



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for the rights of indigenous peoples is currently heading the National Commission. She has also served as the Vice-President of the National Assembly and is the founder of the Center for Indigenous Documentation and Research at the University of Zulia.¹¹ For her restless fight against violence and for the rights of indigenous peoples Noeli Pocaterra has also been proposed as a candidate for the Peace-Nobel Prize in 2005.¹²

In subsequent years, various laws were passed in which the various constitutional guarantees for indigenous peoples found expression. In year 2000, the **Law Governing the Demarcation and Guaranties of Indigenous Habitats and Lands** was introduced in order to regulate the formulation, coordination and execution of policies and plans “*to demarcate and guarantee the right to collective ownership of their lands, which shall be inalienable, not subject to the law of limitations or distraint, and nontransferable*” (Article 119, Constitution 1999). In fact, Minister Maldonado mentioned in 2007 that indigenous communities all over the country had received **formal titles for more than 900,000 hectares of land**. This has been supplemented with state funding for development of comprehensive economic development projects.¹³

In 2005 the **Organic Law Governing Indigenous Peoples and Communities** was ratified, developing the various topics and themes of the Constitution yet in more detail.

Recently, in 2008, the **Law of Indigenous Languages** was introduced with the objective to promote, strengthen, revitalize, preserve and defend indigenous languages. In that context, 39 indigenous languages were declared official languages of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. The government committed itself to guaranteeing the means and resources necessary to safeguard the preservation of indigenous languages, as they are considered part of the cultural patrimony of humanity. The use of indigenous languages is obligatory in indigenous territory and in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples. This also requires for example that

education may be offered in the indigenous language of the people who live in that area.¹⁴ In fact the government reports for example, that 1,500 primary and secondary school teachers have revalorized their ancestral knowledge and practices and improved their competence in teaching indigenous languages.¹⁵ Furthermore, Indigenous Health Offices employing bilingual and intercultural assistants were installed in 12 national hospitals.

International Rules

Apart from putting in place strong national legislation that recognizes and defends Indigenous cultures, Venezuela also adheres to important international rules regarding indigenous rights. On May 22, 2002, the Venezuelan government ratified the International Labor Organization Convention (ILO) 169 concerning indigenous and tribal peoples, which lays out a comprehensive set of human rights provisions.¹⁶

Furthermore, Venezuela voted in favor of the recent United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This document was adopted by the UN General Assembly on Thursday September 13, 2007 and aims at combating discrimination and marginalization of indigenous peoples worldwide.¹⁷

Indigenous Peoples as Political Protagonists

While legal guarantees are fundamentally important as they create the basis on which to act upon, they really are only of use to the people if they are put into practice! Creating the institutional space for indigenous political participation, so they can serve as protagonists in implementing these laws, has been a priority of the current government.

In January 2007, the **People’s Ministry for Indigenous Peoples** was created and superseded the small Office of Indigenous Affairs previously subordinated to the Ministry of Education.¹⁸ The Indigenous Peoples’ Ministry is currently headed



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by Nicia Maldonado (see picture above), who leads a team of eight Deputy-Ministers, one each for urban zones, savannas, mountains/coasts, rivers/lakes, the Amazon region, the Andes, plains and desserts.¹⁹ Five out of the eight are women and in fact, Aloha Nunez, a Wayuu leader from the Zulia state, the Deputy-Minister for Urban Zones and the Executive Secretary of Mission Guaicaipuro, is with 25 years the youngest Deputy Minister in Venezuela (see picture). This confirms the importance of the current government to integrate women, young people and fresh minds in the construction of the country's participatory democratic model.

Mission Guaicaipuro, named after an Indigenous leader who resisted Spanish colonial rule, was launched on October 12, 2003, the same day when Columbus Day was officially renamed to "Indigenous Resistance Day".²⁰ Mission Guaicaipuro is a government-funded program originally set up to restore communal land titles and human rights to Venezuela's numerous indigenous communities. Today the Mission is entrusted with a more comprehensive field of action, as it serves as the coordinative and operational arm of the Ministry. Its objective is to execute governmental projects hand in hand with its protagonists – the indigenous peoples – and provide all indigenous communities with basic services such as healthcare and education.

Another newly created institution is the **Indigenous Communal Council**. Communal Councils in general are elected neighborhood based institutions that take part in local politics and execute urgently needed development projects in their close surroundings, such as infrastructure, recreational, educational projects, etc. Funding for these projects is channeled through the corresponding state institutions. Upon the request of indigenous peoples, this model has been adapted to fit specific indigenous realities. For

example, in indigenous communities, 10 households suffice to form a communal council, while in urban areas; this number must be between 200 and 400.²¹ There are currently more than 2,000 indigenous communal councils in Venezuela.²² In the year 2007 more than 700 and in 2008, more than 280 indigenous communal councils have received state funds for various projects, including those related to clean drinking water, infrastructure and social production.²³ For example, in 2008, more than 100 indigenous communal councils have received more than \$18 million for drinking water projects.²⁴

Common Achievements

As the concerns of indigenous peoples have been neglected extensively by former governments, the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples and its related institutions, hand in hand with the indigenous communities themselves, have been active in solving the peoples' most pressing needs. This includes supplementary nutrition, immediate medical attention, education, school-kits for indigenous children, and much more.



Aloha Nuñez, Deputy-Minister, on her tour through Native American reservations in the US being recipients of Venezuelan discounted heating oil

Nutrition: Only in the year 2008, for example, more than 200,000 alimentary modules have been handed over to more than 1,100 indigenous communities, helping more than 370,000 people to cover their most basic nutritional needs. This short-term assistance plan works parallel

with a long-term project, the "2008 Sowing Plan", through which indigenous communities have received 85,000 kilos of seeds (corn and beans) to be sown in their territory.²⁵

Health Care: For example 132,000 indigenous persons, from 30 different ethnic groups have been attended throughout more than 200 medical special plans during the year 2008. The communities have been provided with medical equipment benefiting more than 60,000 indigenous



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persons in more than 2,500 communities.²⁶ Furthermore, the first floating indigenous attention center (Janoco Flotante, see picture) was introduced in November last year, offering medical attention and other services to communities inhabiting the Delta region. The center consists of a large vessel navigating through the deltas of the Orinoco River and counting on different assistance rooms, such as gynecology, bioanalysis, odontology and pharmaceuticals. So far, more than 400 communities and more than 6,000 families have benefited from this service.²⁷

Moreover, 6 Shamanic Centers in the States Amazonas, Apure, Delta Amacuro, Zulia and Bolivar, have been inaugurated in 2008. These centers specialize on the development and the application of traditional indigenous medicines and have so far benefited more than 20,000 indigenous persons.²⁸

Education: In terms of education, 81,000 indigenous peoples have so far graduated from the educational Mission Robinson II aimed at providing elementary schooling.²⁹

Furthermore, in the states Delta Amacuro, Zulia and Amazonas 1,040 nursery school teachers have developed abilities in cross-cultural education, favoring more than 14,000 indigenous children of up to six years. Moreover the government reported in November last year that around 2,000 indigenous students from the Zulia State have received stipends for further education during the year 2008.³⁰

In a recent interview the Ministry articulated future plans to make use of the Venezuelan satellite “Simon Bolivar”, in order to offer tele-education for remote communities. The satellite would be a real tool for social inclusion as it

allows communities to stay in touch and also to benefit from services such as tele-medicine.³¹

Another project that has been announced by the Ministry is the creation of the first “**Indigenous Peoples University of Cultural Diversity and the Amazon**”. This university will offer programs that correspond to the cultural, geopolitical and regional necessities of indigenous peoples.³²



Janoco Flotante: Floating Indigenous Attention Center in the Delta Amacuro state.

International Cooperation

While much has been achieved in terms of indigenous political participation in the national arena, Venezuelan indigenous peoples don't stop short at the national border. In fact, they have been very active in connecting with their counterparts in the Americas. By way of example, “since 2003, Venezuela has hosted an annual **International**

Encounter of Resistance and Solidarity of Indigenous and Peasant Peoples. Moreover, in August 2007, Venezuela hosted the **First International Meeting of Anti-Imperialist Indigenous Peoples of the Americas**, in which delegates from 45 different countries participated.”³³ This event saw successful continuation in 2008, with more than 1.500 indigenous participants from all over the Americas. Minister Maldonado expressed that events like these are important meeting-points for indigenous peoples, where they work on continental issues that affect their realities, where they create strong links among the many diverse peoples beyond national borders and where they can show the world that indigenous peoples are active and united.³⁴

In this context, Joseph Brings Plenty, a Native American leader from the US who participated in the event reflected: “*As we marched that day, I contemplated the overwhelming support that these indigenous leaders received, including [from] Chavez, who is a Native descendant of his*



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country and a leader of indigenous causes globally. These leaders and the people were being seen and heard in a way that I had never before experienced.”³⁵

During the first week of April 2009, Caracas will be the host of yet another important international indigenous convening, the ordinary meeting of the **“Indigenous Parliament of the Americas”**. This organization is an instance that brings together indigenous legislators from the various Latin American countries with the aim to safeguard their rights and to discuss topics important to indigenous peoples including the environment, economy, land-rights, natural resources, and much more. In this forthcoming meeting they will also debate and propose alternatives “for the problems of the global financial crisis” from the perspective of indigenous peoples.³⁶

Still another important example of organizing across borders is **Venezuela’s solidarity program in the United States**, providing more than 200,000 poor US households with discounted heating oil. Native American tribes are among the main beneficiaries of this program. More than 200 Native American communities, or ~55,000 Native American households, have benefited from this program during the winter 2007/08.³⁷

While it is impossible to repay a 500 year debt of historical neglect by the state within a 10 year time-span, the respect for indigenous cultures and the inclusion of indigenous peoples into all areas of socio-political and economic organizing cannot be overlooked in Venezuela today. In fact, Joseph Brings Plenty makes it clear when he says that indigenous people in Venezuela are being seen and heard. For the first time there is a head of state in Venezuela who listens to indigenous peoples and takes them seriously as important actors and leaders who assume with pride and competence important political positions in order to respond to the needs of their people. The results are proof of all that can be achieved when there is the *political will* to create the conditions necessary that allow

for indigenous peoples to participate in national politics, to assume positions of responsibility and to commonly construct a Venezuela where indigenous roots are celebrated as an important part of the nation’s cultural and ethnic identity.

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For more news and information about Venezuela, please visit: <http://www.venezlon.co.uk/>

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Becker, Marc, Venezuelanalysis, “Venezuela and Indigenous Rights”, 25. Feb. 2004, retrieved, 25.Mar, 2009, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/373>

⁸ VIO, “Indigenous Peoples and the Bolivarian Vision in Venezuela”, http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/Indigeno.us.htm#_edn2

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¹¹ <http://www.un.org/events/women/iwd/2006/pocaterra.htm>

¹² “Diputada Noelí Pocaterra postulada para el Premio Nóbel de la Paz” 14. July 2005,

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¹³ “Gobierno Venezolano entrega títulos de tierras a pueblos indígenas”

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¹⁷ UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/en/declaration.html>

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¹⁹ Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples, “Memoria y Cuenta 2008”,

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²⁰ http://www.minci.gob.ve/noticias/1/3705/dia_de_la.html

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²² http://www.cubainformacion.tv/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=3192

²³ Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples, “Memoria y Cuenta 2008”,

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²⁴ Ibid, pg. 41

²⁵ Ibid. 37

²⁶ Ibid, 34.

²⁷ Ibid. pg 36, 130-131.

²⁸ Ibid. pg. 35-36.

²⁹ <http://chamosaurio.com/2009/01/14/durante-presentacion-de-informe-sobre-gestion-de-2008/>

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