

Venezuela; Racism Persists: 150 Years After the Abolition of Slavery

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Racism continues to exist in Venezuela in different guises 150 years after slavery was abolished, according to the *Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organisations*, which wants the cultural contributions of black people to be recognised by the constitution.

On March 24, 1854, then-president General José Gregorio Monagas promulgated the law that abolished slavery in this South American country. The measure freed approximately 25,000 slaves, three percent of the population at that time. The Venezuelan state decided to indemnify slaveholders to the tune of 200 pesos for each of their former slaves, issuing debt papers that the slaveholders were never able to redeem, because civil war (1859-1864) broke out a few years later. The total value of the debt papers issued was five million pesos – and amount that exceeded the government's annual budget, which ran to three million pesos.

For years, March 24 has been celebrated in Venezuela's schools, and Monagas has been depicted as a liberator, "when all he did was formalise the dissolution of the bonds of submission by blacks to their masters, which had already occurred in practice," according to historian Federico Brito.

The number of slaves in Venezuela had already shrunk due to laws of manumission or formal emancipation from slavery approved by the legislatures that sanctioned Venezuela's independence from the Spanish crown between 1820 and 1830, mainly as a tribute to the participation of thousands of black and mulatto fighters in the struggle for independence.

But "what the state should really have done was to indemnify the blacks who had been slaves, and now what we are trying to do is de-romanticise that history, which did not contribute to improving the conditions faced by the descendants of those slaves," Jorge Guerrero, the head of the Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organisations, said in an interview with Inter Press Service (IPS).

Jesús García with the AfroAmerica Foundation told IPS that to commemorate the anniversary, the groups were holding activities aimed at promoting "a critical look at the past, overcoming the barriers that exist today, and building a future marked by equality."

The constitutional amendment that the groups are pressing for would "recognise this sector of the population in social, cultural, political and religious terms," said García, who pointed out that "we have historically been second-class citizens."

The constitution promoted by populist, left-leaning President Hugo Chávez and approved by voters in a 1999 referendum highlights the contribution made towards the creation of an independent nation by Simón Bolívar and the rest of the independence heroes. It also recognises the resistance put up by the country's indigenous peoples, who unlike blacks are specifically mentioned in the constitution. But "it does not reflect the contribution by the black population, and we accounted for around 400,000 of the one million inhabitants of the country at the time of independence," said García.

Social scientists agree that it is difficult if not impossible to reliably estimate the number of descendants of Africans in today's Venezuela, due to the intense process of cultural, ethnic and racial mixing. However, "talk of 'mestizaje' (racial mixing) tends to sweep under the rug the fact that racial prejudice is alive and well," filmmaker Oscar Lucien -- the director of the film "Memories", a story about fugitive slaves -- commented to IPS.

One of the Network's demands is that the census include questions that would help break down the population in terms of ethnicity, in order to provide special assistance to the communities with the greatest number of Afro-Venezuelans, most of which are located along the Caribbean coast or in specific poor neighbourhoods in the cities of Caracas, Maracay-Valencia (near the capital), and Maracaibo (to the west). In addition, the groups want the cultural contribution made by Afro-Venezuelans to be included in the country's educational curricula.

Although Venezuela's blacks "do not have a strong, highly differentiated presence, like the black populations of Brazil or Cuba, there is a 'campesino' (peasant), provincial vitality, a fortitude among women, a sense of rhythm, of democratic egalitarianism and persistent magical-realism beliefs that are unmistakably their contributions," writer Alfredo Chacón, a retired professor of anthropology, told IPS. The activists and experts interviewed by IPS agreed that racism remains a problem in Venezuela, "in the same way poverty persists: everything that is dark, tending towards black, is identified with negative values and with poverty," said Chacón.

Studies carried out by psychologist Freddy González in public and private high schools in the state of Aragua (60 kms west of Caracas) found that "discrimination is exercised in an indirect manner, through disdain, exclusion, restriction and preference." González noted, for example, that between teachers and students "there are external indications, including facial expression, glances, postures, verbal exchanges, location in the classroom and nicknames that demonstrate discrimination towards Afro-Venezuelans." Discrimination is observed, according to one of González's studies, "in terms of which students receive the compliments and praise, which are chosen for the main roles in cultural ceremonies and events, and even in who is selected as the school 'queen'."

Since Chávez, who comes from a poor family and is of mixed black and indigenous ancestry, took office in 1999, Venezuelan society has been sharply polarised and divided between the largely wealthy and middle-class opposition movement whose members tend to be mainly of European ancestry, and the president's followers, who are largely poor and darker-skinned. "One sector of the middle-class is annoyed that the president is of mixed-race descent," admitted Lucien, who is opposed to the government.

After visiting several poor communities in Venezuela and meeting with representatives of the government and the opposition movement in January, a delegation from the *TransAfrica* Forum – a U.S. organisation headed by Hollywood star Danny Glover (*Lethal Weapon*, *The Color Purple*) – warned that racism was still a problem in this country.

"Don't let yourselves be fooled by the idea that there is no racism in Venezuela," the head of *TransAfrica*, Bill Fletcher, told journalists. "We have received so much attention that I wonder how often Afro-Venezuelans appear in the press." "We are all coffee with cream" – a mix of white, black and Indian – is a popular adage in this country where few can state unequivocally that they are of unmixed European, African or indigenous ancestry. Pedro Alcántara, a lawmaker belonging to an opposition social democratic party, even told IPS that "In Venezuela, racism is not possible, this is a very mixed country." But one notorious recent case of racism was a spoof by the private Venezuelan TV news station *Globovisión* – a vociferously anti-Chávez channel – of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who visited Caracas in late February to attend the summit of the Group of 15 developing countries, which promotes South-South cooperation. Images of Mugabe, who appeared to nod off during a speech by Chávez, were accompanied by sounds of snoring and monkey-like screeches, followed by hilarious laughter by the programme's presenters. African ambassadors to Venezuela – representing Algeria, Egypt, Libya, the Saharawi Republic (Western Sahara), Nigeria and South Africa – issued a statement of protest against *Globovisión*, "whose viewers have been presented with an indecent spectacle, replete with unquestionably racist and rude sound-effects and gestures." But the TV station's managers justified the sketch saying the African ambassadors "do not understand Venezuelans' sense of humour."