

GREAT DECISIONS

GDTV 2008 Extended Interview

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On U.S.-Venezuela relations...

If you see what we export and we import from the US, we are the 2nd trading partner of the U.S. We are the first, one of the most important suppliers of oil and oil products to the U.S. We have a huge investment in this country. We have a lot of common things. Baseball. We have more than 70 Venezuelan baseball players in the Major Leagues. So why are we having all these confrontations and problems? I think that Venezuela is embarking in an alternative model to what is presented as a Western, elite type of democracy, free trade, U.S. model. And Venezuela is going in a different direction. And I think that is basically what people instead of confronting the ideas in that model, they try to present us as the bad guys, the guys that are not democratic, and this is the origin of the confrontation. You are right, the original confrontation is because we are going through an alternative model of development.

On improving U.S.-Venezuela relations...

Mutual respect. Understand the changes. Reach out to the real people, listen to them. Don't qualify them before you even know them. And for the U.S. to understand that the times of hegemonistic power of the U.S. over Latin America are over. And the sooner the better, that they realize that the sooner the better for the U.S. and for Latin America.

We cannot change our geographic position, Venezuela cannot take Venezuelan territory and go to Asia. And the U.S. will stay here, in this part of the world. So we are really neighbors. And we have a long common history. I think it is now the time to review not only certain policies but to really have a new understanding of what is going on and what is the future for all of us.

And that means that we have to respect each other, we have to forget about this idea of imposing models, we have to understand that if you want to fight poverty, you have to really do it. We have a common goal. There are more than 40 million people in this country. In the U.S. the richest country in the world, the most important, the sole and unique military power in the world. So I think there may be a lot of learning for the U.S. from what is going on in South America. We are not enemies. We have a common destiny. But we have to sit down, understand each other and understand that the times of imperialism and hegemonistic control over Latin America by the U.S. are over.

On democracy in Venezuela...

One of the problems in the U.S. is that you have the double morality. So one the one hand you criticize countries but on the other hand, you don't behave as well as to pretend to be an example to the rest of the world. And so I always ask U.S. people, do you think it is democratic, that if you want to be elected senator of this country do you need to have five million dollars? So it means that unless you have the money or the ability to raise the money, you're out of the game.

On the contrary, on the other hand, there are very important experiences of democratic development in this country. But this is not perfect. And the other thing is that you can pretend that you are going to impose to the rest of the world a kind of development that is already the one you have in the U.S. And by the way, there are a lot of critics of the way democracy is in this country. So first I think I always talk to the U.S. and I say first, you have to look at home, what you have at home before you go and try to impose or to qualify what is going on outside the country.

Secondly, I don't know, people say that there are problems with freedom of expression in Venezuela. And they are the same people who have been saying for the last eight consecutive years, 24 hours a day, and seven days a week that there is no freedom of expression in Venezuela. And those guys are still in Venezuela! So it's kind of suspicious.

There is a free press in Venezuela. Unfortunately the free press in Venezuela has taken a direct political role, this is recognized by them. And that tells you that we need the development of a loyal opposition to the constitution, to the new reality in Venezuela, because there is a new reality. There is new leaders, new faces, and new ideas. All of that has not been imposed. We went through a democratic process, there was a new constitution that was voted by the Venezuelan people, and there were elections, then reelections, even a national referendum, against President Chaves. I think it is the first time in the history of the hemisphere that we have a popular referendum to say to the president you stay or you have to go.

By the way, with all the international observers, the Carter Center, the organizations from the U.S., the European union, etc. So what I feel is you have to understand there are new processes, new ideas, new social development. And all of that has been happening in peace and democracy. It's amazing because when you look in the mirror you will spot that the governor of Venezuela now, the government of Bolivia, the government of Ecuador, the government of Brazil, because they are doing all these reforms, you will have the impression that there is like a civil war.

What happened is those countries have respected, much more than the right-wing guys of the past, democracy. So it's possible to go through a process of real social economic,

political change, and at the same time keep democracy, and more important for us is that this happen peacefully. If you don't have these changes peacefully, then you will have war. And look what is going on in other parts of the war where people don't understand that new reality needs new ideas, new people, new faces, even new institutions. So this is what we're trying to do.

On regional trade...

Venezuela is located in a place, where on the one hand we have the Caribbean façade of the country, and we have been always very much related with the Caribbean countries. We have a lot of trade and initiatives with the Caribbean countries. We also participate sometime as observers in the summits of the Caribbean countries. On the other hand we are an Amazonian country. We share with Brazil and Ecuador and Peru the Latin American Amazonian forest., that you know is one of the largest natural forests in the world.

On the other hand we are like an Andean country. We used to belong to the Andean community until very recently. On the other hand we had a lot of discussion recently in this last two or three weeks in Venezuela, once the countries in the Andean community want to talk to Venezuela and to sit down and to see what are the proposals for Venezuela for a re-launching of an Andean community. And Venezuela is about to enter fully as a full member of the MERCOSUR. So it's very interesting because of Venezuela because you have on one hand the Caribbean side, the Amazonian side, the Andean side, and the south with the MERCOSUR participation.

On political and economic unity in Latin America...

Well the thing is that we at the end consider that we have to look for a political unity of the hemisphere, of this continent of South America. We don't see trade without a political unity. I mean, you can have trade with many countries in the world and we do have trade. But what is strategic for us is to look for a political unity of all our countries, and to have a regional project that will unite us and recreate all the potentialities and develop all the potentialities of South America to be a world player. But we can achieve that only if we have the sense of political unity and of course economic unity.

On nationalization of industry...

In the case of Venezuela, renationalization of our natural resources basically has meant first from tax point of view that we were able to increase significantly all the oil income, the revenue in Venezuela. That of course was also put to finance basic social problems. And on the other hand, having full control over our natural resources has allowed us to go beyond the traditional projects of oil and gas and embark ourselves in the regional projects, like the pipeline crossing South America, Petro-Caribe, which is an initiative to

consolidate market in the Caribbean countries, the idea of Petrol America which is basically to work together with all the Latin American Countries.

I'll give you the very brief example of Uruguay. In Uruguay, they have a refinery. We have invested in that refinery. We sent the projects. They are paying us back in software, houses, and many things. And at the same time we have invited the Uruguayans to participate and to produce oil with us in Venezuela. So at the end which was not an oil country will become an associate of Venezuela in developing the resources in Venezuela and supplying the Uruguayan society. And we have done that also in the context of an energy treat that will guarantee for countries in South America supply of oil from Venezuela for more than 30 years.

On social reforms in Venezuela...

The only way to counter act the huge gap between rich and poor, the levels of poverty and exclusion was radical source of reforms. The kind of "soft" approach to social reforms wasn't enough for us. So I do agree that we are going through a process of radical transformation of society, which is basically, how can we, in a generation, eliminate poverty and social exclusion?

For us, the only way to fight poverty really is to empower the poor. How do you empower the poor? First you have to give the people opportunities to go over the huge gap that they have regarding social conditions. And for that you have to have a massive process of transfers of social services, including education. And when I mean education you have to go to illiteracy problems. We have illiteracy problems and we have been able to take out of illiteracy almost everybody in Venezuela. It's less than 1% remaining. Then we have to give them basic education, even 2nd degree education. At the same time you have to provide them some training. And this is what we are doing. We call them missions. So you have one mission for illiteracy, one mission for basic education, one mission for training.

At the same time we have to give them health. And for the first time we are really going into the barrios with preventative medicine. We have had very important support by the Cuban Revolution. At the beginning we had more than 20,000 Cuban doctors that came to work with us in our communities. There was a lot of scandal in the media, but now even the opposition, they know they can do whatever, but they have to stay with the Cuban doctors. Because the communities, they love these guys, because at the end they are coming to live and work with them.

So this is what we have done, you have to have a massive transformation of resources. We have to do that and for us it was very important to get the fiscal revenue for that. And this is what we did all the transformations, we did in the oil sector, because we weren't making almost anything, nothing. Companies, and the international consumers,

and everybody was getting a lot of money, and so we transformed the whole fiscal regime and now we have the resources. This is one thing.

Secondly, if you want to do a radical social change, you have to transform the way democracy has been working. Because basically in our countries democracy have been an elite type of democracies. So what you see is very educated people, and people that have money, that are then in control of political parties, they control the policy. So if you want to control the agenda, you have to give the chance to people to give a real players. And this is why we are going through a whole process, this is a revolution of participation in Venezuela. I would say that those are the two main things.

Third, the last issue that I think is important is neo-liberalism and all these recipes and ideas of the past they don't work, so what is the idea? Do we just have to make some corrections or do we have to try an alternative model? And this is what we are doing. But one of the main things is integration. Because unless we produce a political unity in the hemisphere and we are able to use all our capabilities to compliment ourselves, to have solidarity among ourselves, unless we do that, we won't be a player in the international world today. Even a country like Venezuela with oil and a lot of money because of oil, it wouldn't be possible for us to have an independent way of developing ourselves unless we get the regional perspectives.

So I'm sorry I was a bit long, but it was a way of explaining to you on the one hand the massive transfer of social services; on the second hand the empowerment of the poor and basically changing the traditional structure of democracy; and third explore an alternative model of development that starts with a completely different view of regional integration as a priority for even local development.

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