

NOW-TIME VENEZUELA

MEDIA ALONG THE PATH OF
THE BOLIVARIAN PROCESS

PART 2:
REVOLUTIONARY TELEVISION IN CATIA

May 14 – July 16, 2006

CATIA TVE

SELECTIONS FROM THE STATION AND THE PRODUCTION TEAMS

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PREVIOUS PAGE:

Catia TVe crew in Isaac Medina, western Caracas.

University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive
MATRIX Program for Contemporary Art

PREFACE

NOW-TIME VENEZUELA:

MEDIA ALONG THE PATH OF THE BOLIVARIAN PROCESS

In 1998, with Hugo Chávez's election to the presidency, Venezuela began a profound process of social and political change. This is the Bolivarian revolution, the immediate roots of which reach back at least fifteen years to the Caracazo, a spontaneous uprising in rejection of neoliberalism and capitalism that shook the streets of Caracas for a number of days in 1989.¹ Today, Venezuela's revolutionary process is reaching to all levels of society. Its hallmarks are social protagonism, participatory democracy, a constitution calling for universal rights to education and health, and a series of land and educational reforms—a formula that has evolved from a modest critique of neoliberalism to a broad and internationalist plan for a socialism for the twenty-first century.² The projects in the yearlong MATRIX cycle *Now-Time Venezuela: Media Along the Path of the Bolivarian Process* will operate in solidarity with this process. They are not only or even primarily representations of or reflections on this process but, as our title indicates, *along* the path itself.

Our cycle involves a theory of art as well as a theory of history. In keeping with a recognition that art, as a superstructure, is dependent on broader processes of social change, the work included in the *Now-Time* cycle is aligned with epic struggles

for social and political change; as a consequence, it is opposed to the workings of late capitalism that have emptied most spheres of human activity, including culture, of their autonomous values and life (one lifeless result of which is the so-called art world). The stakes of this political and cultural struggle are clear: on the one side emptiness, desolation, and sometimes even mental and bodily death; on the other, an explosion of creativity and resistance on the level of life. The unique and powerful character of this explosion in the Venezuelan context is one reason we feel justified in using a term from Walter Benjamin's speculations on a discontinuous radical history, "now-time," to refer to the unprecedented character of the Bolivarian event.

Chris Gilbert

Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

REVOLUTIONARY TELEVISION IN CATIA

Chris Gilbert

Catia TVE is a community television station operating out of the Caño Amarillo neighborhood of western Caracas. Begun as a cultural center and cinema club that morphed into a guerrilla station, today Catia TVE broadcasts fourteen hours a day, reaching more than half of the metropolis. A true “channel,” most of what it airs is produced by ECPAI¹ groups of activists and organizers who are trained at the station in brief workshops. Like the international Indymedia network, Catia TVE was born not out of an abstract idea about information, even less an interest in new technology, but out of a struggle for access on the part of people and movements. Therefore, unsurprisingly, its history bears the marks of this struggle: Since Catia TVE is a voice committed to popular power, and that power overwhelmingly supports Hugo Chávez Frías’s Bolivarian government, it was shut down briefly by former opposition mayor Alfredo Peña in 2003. The station continues to be harassed by the bourgeois opposition and their corporate media.² However, it also continues to fight back—through the media and through litigation.

In the struggle for representation, popular participation forms Catia TVE’s key methodology and ideology. As against the views advanced in dominant versions of media theory—which is tainted by both techno-determinism³ and a tendency to commodify

information—the purpose of the media is not reducible to the pursuit of accurate information; nor, it follows, is the role of “alternative” or “independent” media, despite these names, to provide alternative or more autonomous news. Instead, what is at stake is popular ownership of the means of production, which for television means access to production equipment, skills, and airtime. This is equivalent to the profoundly participatory structure that Catia TVE, in the language of the Venezuelan revolution, denominates with the shorthand of “a universal right to communication.”⁴

Catia TVE’s embrace of the theory and practice of participation is both exemplary and revolutionary. Its approach to popular communication, informed by such theorists as Paulo Freire, Mario Kaplún, and Armand Mattelart, is manifestly articulated along class lines. Hence it is resistant to mythologizing that would rally behind the usually empty signifiers “democracy,” “freedom,” or “openness.”⁵ Similarly, the approach may be distinguished from those liberal visions of the media in which participation is limited to types of “involvement” and “engagement” that leave basic power structures intact. Instead, Catia TVE’s practice of participation opens the communication apparatus to transformation on the part of the people themselves. This is why its *participatory* democratic structure translates into a revolutionary one. In line with

Lenin's double perspective on socialism—as electricity (technology) plus soviets (councils, social and political organization)—Catia TVE never loses sight of the radical social dimension at the center of its practice.

When a deliberate politics of participation reaches deep into the organizational structure of a media collective—as is much more common in the global South than in the North—it clarifies the promising way that such groups can become communication arms of social movements and revolutionary societies. If the latter are about constructing new ways of living in the world and just forms of social, political, and economic relations, the role of the militant media group is to promote these social relations *and transpose* them onto the plane of communication. In this way, the media collectives become not just tools in the struggle, which they are, but in varying degrees embodiments of the new organizational structures.

Taking the large view of the relation of social movements to militant media collectives, as Claudia Espinoza Iturri does, one is able to see how the mainstream media is unable to connect with or even perceive much of social activism.⁶ On the one hand, the media systematically and violently misrepresent such movements when they do appear in their purview, in keeping with the current widespread criminalization of protest. Conversely, the social movements resist infiltration by mainstream journalists—sometimes by force—and rely on community media to give voice to their own struggles as an emergent multitude. All of which is to say that, not only is it clear that the corporate media retains its class interests—

and that these class interests are day by day becoming more transparent—but also that the era of the bourgeois media's hegemony (meaning its ability to represent itself as typical or universal) is coming to a close. This is the new day that the emergence of groups such as Catia TVE signals in a way that, insofar as moral and intellectual authority have shifted fully to their side, exceeds the descriptions of such initiatives as merely independent or alternative.

On any given day at Catia TVE, the ECPAI groups will be hard at work in the editing room, the offices where people seem to toil around the clock will be abuzz with activity, while the broadcasting room will be processing a sundry array of topics: from a long program on the Iraq war protest held on International Women's Day to smaller projects on the youth newspaper *El Querrequerre* or the work of street sculptors in Caracas. In our sampling of this material in the exhibition, we have tried to touch upon the range of what is broadcast, not only with the aim of giving a sense of its variety and depth, but also in the hope that one can extrapolate from the particular content to arrive at its revolutionary methodology. It is to highlight how that methodology is extendable to our own circumstances that we present the two additional works—a self-reflexive account of the working methods of the station and a series of messages for the United States in direct addresses from “Catia,” as western Caracas is called. The latter project reminds us that Catia TVE, working as part of the Bolivarian process to construct a twenty-first-century socialism in Venezuela, is also a gambit and an inspiration to people taking power worldwide.

CATIA TVE, TELEVISION FROM, BY, AND FOR THE PEOPLE

Collectively written by members of Catia TVE

THE CONTEXT IN WHICH CATIA TVE OPERATES

The community and alternative media movement came into being more than forty years ago in Latin America and more than twenty years ago in Venezuela, out of the wave of popular education, liberation theology, and liberation struggles against dictatorships all across the continent in the 1960s and 1970s.

Rather than coming out of anarchist movements, as was the case in Europe, the discussion about alternative media in Venezuela and the rest of Latin America took shape around the concepts of the *popular* and *communitarian* that were more characteristic of the Latin American situation and were adapted to the urban and suburban peripheries, as well as the farming, mining, and indigenous communities in diverse regions of the continent. This is how Latin America's popular communication movement developed, little by little, in the face of dictatorships and against the imposition of an imperialist ideology.

Beginning with flyers, posters, sound recordings, community publications, megaphones, radio speakers, and up to the higher-wattage signals used for radio and television broadcasts,

community media has always been part of the work of popular assemblies and the struggle to “make known” and “make the people’s voices heard.” In brief, community media works to democratize communication, effecting the necessary separation of the medium and the message.¹

Today in Venezuela, the debate over “freedom of expression” is little more than an excuse that the bourgeoisie uses to monopolize spaces of power in corporate media outlets that they themselves operate. The corporate media’s aim is to create an extensive ideological apparatus that subjugates and alienates people, keeping them “asleep.” Fortunately, beginning in 1999, when the newly formed National Assembly debated and passed the Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones (Organic Telecommunications Law), a path opened toward building a legal framework for strengthening the community media movement—which had been fighting for democratizing communication—now making it reach all the people. In 2002, the National Assembly passed the Reglamento de Radio-difusión Sonora y Televisión Abierta Comunitarias (Free Community Radio and Television Broadcast Ruling), which, in addition to setting legal norms for the community media sector, provided the means to carry out the democratic and participatory principles

consecrated in the Bolivarian Constitution and also fostered community media in the service of social change.

These days, when Venezuela's political and social reality is at the eye of the storm, community media plays a fundamental role as a means of ideological formation, in harmony with the changes that we are experiencing. A large part of the population, who before could never express themselves, are now beginning to see glimpses of the freedom they possess to change their reality, with a view towards grassroots development within communities, and by extension towards constructing socialism.

BACKGROUND: CULTURAL AND POLITICAL EFFORTS THAT BROUGHT CATIA TVE INTO BEING

The West Catia Tve community station was born as the dream of a group of *compañeros* from the Simón Rodríguez barrio in the sector called Manicomio² (previously known as the Barracas de Manicomio) in the La Pastora region of the city of Caracas. We had had progressive ideas since our youth, when we began to do political work with students from the Luis Espelozín public high school. It was our "little university in Catia." Informed by the experience of working with these students, our group had a political militancy close to that of the PRV (Revolutionary Party of Venezuela) and other leftist movements.

The idea of the television station came from a collective initiative³ in our barrio to introduce cultural alternatives to the community. We began in 1989 in a space that had been abandoned after Venezuela's Caracazo uprising. Towards the end of the same year, we founded the group 10.12, performing *gaitas* (traditional Venezuelan music played in December). The success of these performances—everyone wanted to participate—resulted in our taking over another space that was available in the barrio, following an assembly in which the community decided that we should function there. This is how we formed La Casa de la Cultura Simón Rodríguez (Simón Rodríguez Cultural Center). The space quickly turned into a town hall of sorts for the neighborhood: the community held weekly meetings there to plan activities, discuss political issues, and analyze problems at the national and neighborhood level—in sum, everything of concern to the community. Then the repression began: our building was raided, some *compañeros* were arrested, we were threatened and persecuted. During the IV Republic (1958–98),⁴ the authorities looked down upon any type of community organizing.

We realized that we needed to organize more activities and to increase local residents' participation. With this in mind we founded the Cine Club Manicomio (Manicomio Film Club), which had the aim of generating a space for debate and discussion around film screenings. The films were projected amid the bleachers of the sports stadium—one of the few covered stadiums in the working-class neighborhoods of Caracas—where we had an improvised

screen hanging from the ceiling to effect an open-air movie theater. Our group became more enthusiastic about *cineclubismo*, and we applied ourselves increasingly to this project.

We were very much taken by everything related to audiovisual production, and because our cine club was one of the very few with regular activities (every Friday and Saturday), in 1993 we received a letter from the National Center of Film in Venezuela (CENAC) offering us the premiere of the film *Disparen a Matar* by Carlos Azpúrua, for which they brought us screening equipment. In a similar manner, our work with the Cine Club Manicomio allowed us to obtain a video camera, and we started to record the activities of the community. Our first video was about the *Paradura del Niño* (a traditional activity); we announced the plan to project it in place of a foreign film. Nearly 2,000 people attended this event, instead of the usual figure of 200. We were amazed by this, and on that day in mid-1995, our dream of organizing a television station so that people could see themselves represented was born.

In the pursuit of that aim, we began interviewing people from the barrio with a small camera. The idea was that they would voice concerns and create reports on the problems of the community. We took advantage of baseball culture in Venezuela and broadcast games in the stadium, but in place of the intermission advertising of the commercial media, from which we were “lifting the signal,” we inserted the videos that we produced. Thus we were able—

little by little—to raise political consciousness within the community. It was no longer a European actress or a North American actor on the screen; no longer the streets of Paris or New York, the simulated realities of other latitudes. Now, it was the flesh and blood of people we knew, the alleyways of “Las Barracas.” It was our reality with its joys, sorrows, victories, and conflicts.

Time went by, and in 1998 we founded the civic association Centro de Cultura Cinematographia Linterna Mágica (Magic Lantern Film Culture Center) to continue our audiovisual work, but this time with children. In addition, we traveled to various states in Venezuela holding film screenings. But the dream remained to create a television station. We first had the idea of creating a closed-circuit broadcast in the barrio, running cables from house to house. We were told we were crazy, and that it was going to be very difficult.

Then, when Hugo Chávez won the elections in 1998, we organized a meeting in the city of Maracay (Aragua State) with other groups that were working along the same lines as we. There we learned that some *compañeros* in the Táchira State had been operating a television station for several years. One member of that group, who was a telecommunications engineer, had designed and built a transmitter that was up and running. We discussed our project with this *compañero*; he worked with us, providing the technical support to get us started. Thus, in mid-2000, our dream became a reality.

DON'T WATCH TV... MAKE IT!

Even though Catia Tve began broadcasting in 2000, it was not until March 30, 2001, that the station was officially on the air with the authorization of the Venezuelan state. The *compañero* Chávez, having found out about our station, was inspired by the project of this group of residents of western Caracas and came out to inaugurate it himself.

At the time Catia Tve was being founded and built, there developed, as we mentioned earlier, the legal framework that allowed community media to flourish throughout the whole of Venezuela (see APPENDIX). All of this was informed by a discussion about the means of communication that people wanted and needed—a discussion in which the state, the movement of community and alternative media, and, of course, the community itself participated. It was from these discussions that Catia Tve went from being something that *should be* to something that *actually was*, the strength of which was and is rooted in direct participation of the communities and in the consolidation of the social fabric needed for the revolutionary process that Venezuela is carrying out.

It is a core principle of Catia Tve to encourage the participation of organized communities in the making of audiovisual programs that present their struggles and community engagement. Further, we aim to encourage a discussion that extends from the commercial

communication media that we already have to the kinds of media we want as a people, with a democratic, participatory, and two-way character. With these aims in view, and taking into account that community media is a space in which to exercise popular power, at least 70 percent of Catia Tve's programming is created by all those who fight every day, with whatever means possible, to change the shape of everyday reality. That is to say, 70 percent of the programming is realized by the people themselves, while the other 30 percent is programming generated by Catia Tve's staff or consists of independent production (including full-length films, shorts, and documentaries).

Catia Tve is a community medium with a class allegiance; those involved are working-class people with a measure of political formation and a sense of social responsibility. We fight against all forms of discrimination and against imperialism. Because of this and because we are committed, as group, to the struggle of our people, Catia Tve is open to all those organized groups belonging to the diverse communities of Caracas that make known to us their desire to participate in a responsible and politically aware manner, with a view to strengthening the community and not their individual interests. We view participation not as a chance for people to express their personal opinion on a particular subject, but rather as the right the people have to express themselves through the electromagnetic spectrum that belongs to the state. In other words, as Venezuelans, all of us are entitled to create our

own audiovisual discourses without mediators and without the influence of a dominant class that maintains its hegemony in the world. From this emerges one of our main mottos: “Don’t watch television . . . make it!”—our collective invitation to *create* television. To achieve this aim, we organize a series of workshops in which groups gain the basic tools to enable them to realize their own productions, and we maintain a weekly space for each group in the Catia TVe programming schedule.

The training has a political-ideological character more than a technical one. The workshops are based on the fundamental principles of popular education—democratic participation, collective organization, activist training, and concrete transformation of life. The methodology begins with a group recovering and analyzing its collective experience with a view to recognizing, with a critical perspective, the achievements, errors, obstacles, and possibilities that exist to change and improve its reality. All of this requires an understanding of the medium, the surroundings, and the social context in which the group lives and operates. It also requires recognizing the cultural and ideological values that shape the group’s vision and interpretation of reality and govern its actions; and an effort to associate learning with the collective construction of knowledge, while locating the specific area of practice of the collective. This approach is open, flexible, participatory, collective, practical, and experiential. Participatory techniques become a “pretext” to facilitate the group’s reflections, dialogue, analyses, and sharing of knowledge—which come from their own realities

and experiences as participants, in their own idioms, and in a lively and motivating form that provokes and maintains their interest.

When the Introductory Workshop on Community Audiovisual Production comes to an end, the groups of participants (each ranging from four to seven members) form an ECPAI (Independent Community Audiovisual Production Team). ECPAIs are configured because Catia TVe is committed to encouraging collective work, which is to be placed at the service of the community’s shared interests. In addition, working collectively favors the organized distribution of labor and encourages discussions that lead to a conscious analysis of the production of material (“Two heads work better than one,” as the saying goes). We believe the more people involved, the better for the team and for the community. This is communitarian work—those in ECPAIs belong to a specific social sector, with shared interests and characteristics, and bring these relationships to the service of strengthening productive organizing in their surroundings. By saying *Community*, we are not limiting our reference to the barrios; we are also talking about student, worker, professional, artistic, and sports communities. *Audiovisual Production* refers to what Catia TVe does. Finally, when we say *Independent*, we allude to the content produced for distribution by the community teams, which do not toe the line of an “editorial position” as is the case with private corporate media outlets, where the owner of the outlet (and the commercial interests that the outlet obeys) dictates the broadcast content.

TO BUILD SOCIALISM: RESEARCH, COMMUNICATE, AND ORGANIZE!

The struggle for community media is at the very heart of the fight for the socialization of broadcast airwaves. Though transnational corporations continue to make profits with the concentration and monopolization of media, we believe that the airwaves should be recuperated for and by the people of the world for the benefit of humanity.

Until now, broadcasting was difficult for communities to access; Catia Tve emerged as a tool for organizing through which communities could build their own audiovisual discourse using the television broadcast signal. Each ECPAI organizes itself along geographical or social lines, develops its material with community participation, and uses television in the way a community or workers' organization might use flyers, posters, and other means of communication. This is how the long road to socialism begins: the ECPAI as participatory and democratic organization, a site for the discussion of audiovisual materials within the community; the ECPAI broadcasting through Catia Tve and sharing its experiences with other communities.

One should note here that community production of audiovisual materials is not facilitated through philanthropy. Rather, it is the poor, the exploited, organizing for liberation. Communication is organization, and working-class media *is* revolution. It can be said that public opinion does not exist; what exists is class-based

opinion. Today we are building a channel, a space to represent the opinion of the exploited class in Venezuela.

Catia Tve was the first legal community television channel in Venezuela, and it had an instrumental role in providing coverage of the active resistance against the April 11, 2002, coup against the state and the people's reclaiming power for the state on April 13. Catia Tve also covered the attempted sabotage of Venezuela's oil fields of late 2002 and early 2003. This history has turned Catia Tve into a national and international model, encouraging its own growth alongside other community television stations in Venezuela.

Catia Tve intends to expand, but not following the model of the corporate media. We want to grow by incorporating other communities and residents into the community television movement. Currently, there are more than thirty community television stations throughout Venezuela. Still, we think a great deal needs to be done. Catia Tve holds audiovisual production workshops in Caracas and throughout the nation with the aim of organizing groups so they can form new community television stations.

The struggles of workers, campesinos, women, indigenous peoples, and other exploited sectors flow together in community media. Through community media, these groups transform the struggles into a revolutionary program—becoming one voice but without

losing the struggles' plurality. This unity is needed to move us toward building socialism.

When we are asked if Venezuela's community television stations are in favor of the Bolivarian government, our answer is that Catia TVe is a space where all the exploited sectors in Venezuela can participate. And so long as the government remains in support of these struggles, the community media will identify with the Bolivarian revolution and will fight against anyone working to oust the government and take what belongs to the citizens. At the same time, Venezuelans will also struggle against any elements of the bureaucracy that try to usurp power for personal gain. For that reason, we say that community television stations engage in the revolution inside the revolution.

This is how community television inscribes itself in the struggle for liberation in Venezuela, with a perspective that is critical, self-critical, and class-conscious. We participate from our communities, providing ideological training that is building a single, class-based movement for liberation. Community media are tools for unity that can help us move in the same direction. Unity and communication are also tools necessary for strengthening and deepening the revolution.

APPENDIX:

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY MEDIA

The recent history of community media in Venezuela is exemplary for how the Bolivarian government works to support popular struggles for access to the means of communication—state and popular power joining together in a way that is distinctive of the Venezuelan revolution. When the National Assembly convened in 1999 to write the new Venezuelan constitution, the movements for community media participated in these discussions, working to establish the concept of *social property*, which in turn allowed one to speak of *social ownership* of radio and television airwaves. Out of these discussions came the Ley Orgánica de Telecomunicaciones (Organic Telecommunications Law) of 2000, which embodied the right to community media in a couple of key articles:

Article 2: The general objectives of the Law are ... to promote and encourage people to exercise the right to establish open community radio and television stations that have a public rather than for-profit mission.

Article 12: In his or her role of a user of telecommunications services every individual has the right to ... exercise individually and collectively the right to free and pluralist communication and the use of adequate conditions to create nonprofit community radio and television stations dedicated to the community he or she inhabits, in accordance with the law.

Then, in 2002, the Reglamento de Radiodifusión Sonora y Televisión Abierta Comunitarias (Free Community Radio and Television Broadcast Ruling), which also came out of a deeply participative process involving the community media, defined the criteria for acquiring permits to broadcast legally. These criteria were informed by the community media's model of "separating the medium from the message" with structures that encourage and enable independently produced messages from the communities.

Article 28: Community radio and television stations will be media with independent and community productions, from the community and from other communities. At least 70 percent of a community station's daily programming must be produced within the community.

Article 29: No single producer, from the community or independent, can take up more than 20 percent of the daily programming broadcast at a community television or radio station. The station's staff may produce a maximum of 15 percent of the programming with the rest to be produced by community volunteers.

ENDNOTES

PREFACE

1. The Bolivarian revolution, together with the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela that came into place after the 1999 constitution, take their names from nineteenth-century revolutionary Simón Bolívar.

2. Together with participation, protagonism is a central concept in the Bolivarian process, meaning that people themselves are the actors in the political process.

REVOLUTIONARY TELEVISION IN CATIA

1. ECPAI stands for Equipo Comunitario de Producción Audiovisual Independiente, or Independent Community Audiovisual Production Team.

2. For example, Johan Lugo, a Catia TVe producer, was assaulted by Noé Pernía, a journalist from Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV), in July 2005.

3. Techno-determinism is the belief, as old as the Saint-Simonians' misplaced faith in the railroads to reform society, that technology itself carries a positive, even utopian social agency. While few would explicitly articulate this thesis, it continues, unacknowledged, to inform much of media theory and the artistic practices that take shape under the rubric "new media."

4. For more on the new Venezuelan telecommunications laws see APPENDIX.

5. Key figures in these practices are the educator Paulo Freire, media theorist Armand Mattelart, and theorist of popular communication Mario Kaplún. The last, a Uruguayan, was especially important in bringing the practices of liberation pedagogy in dialogue with communication theory, insisting that communication channels should be two-way and empowering of the community, which is recast as an "interlocutor" rather than a "listener." The Venezuelan situation proves definitively that the mainstream media is not able to convince (brainwash) people with its messages. What the mass media *is* often able to do is convince people of their

own powerlessness. Hence the key message of the mass media is not that you *must believe*, but that you *cannot resist*—you cannot shape your reality. It is against this negation of the other's existence, with a practice aimed at making people creators of their own messages and realities, that the theory of popular communication militates.

6. Claudia Espinoza Iturri's description and theorization of the conflictual landscape and disconnect between traditional media and social movements is sketched in "De Achacachi a Nayaf: Los Mitos de la Mentira Mediática," in *De Enteros y Medios de Comunicación: Tendencias en la Oferta y el Consumo Mediático en Bolivia*, edited by Adalid Contreras Baspineiro (La Paz: CEDLA, 2005).

CATIA TVE, TELEVISION FROM, BY, AND FOR THE PEOPLE

1. The "separation of the medium and the message" refers to the idea that the messages—which come from the communities—are not dictated by corporate interests and the mass media marching in lockstep.

2. Manicomio, the name of this neighborhood, literally means "mental hospital" and refers to a psychiatric institution once located there.

3. The founders of Catia TVe are Eliano Camili, Blanca Eekhout, Leafar Guevara, Ricardo Márquez, and Wilfredo Vásquez.

4. The IV Republic refers to the Venezuelan government from 1958 to 1998. Following the ratification of the Bolivarian Constitution, the Fifth or Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela came into being.

