



GABRIEL HETLAND

Parish budget assembly in Torres, Venezuela, November 2009

Grassroots Democracy in Venezuela

One town's participatory budget has attracted activists and officials from around the world.

by GABRIEL HETLAND

If there are obstacles, the shortest line between two points may be the crooked line.
—Bertolt Brecht

One of the central debates about Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and his “Bolivarian Revolution” concerns the question of democracy. To supporters, he has ushered in an “explosion of popular power,” with the ills of representative democracy giving way to the promise of participatory democracy. To opponents, Chávez is a ruthless dictator, riding roughshod over constitutional order and ignoring the country's true needs in his quest for perpetual power. (Those in the latter camp might claim as new evidence for their views Chávez's January appointment as defense minister of Gen. Henry Rangel Silva, who has been accused by the United States of colluding with Colombia's FARC rebels in drug and weapons trafficking and is branded as hostile to democracy by opposition politicians in Venezuela.)

Both of these views can be found in the largely agrarian municipality of Torres (population 197,000), in the central-western Venezuelan state of Lara. The pages of *El Caroreño*, Torres's only newspaper, are filled with vivid images of potholed streets, dilapidated housing and hooded bandits. The scathing attacks regularly unleashed by *El Caroreño*'s fiercely anti-Chavista editor (and ex-mayor of Torres), Javier Oropeza, against the “ineptitude” and “negligence” of Torres's past two mayors, Julio Chávez (2004–08)

and Edgar Carrasco (2008–present), leave little doubt regarding the paper's opinion on the source of the municipality's woes. Yet although many of the problems featured in *El Caroreño* are quite real, it is difficult to sustain the idea that they stem from Hugo Chávez's “dictatorial” ways or the leadership of Julio Chávez (no relation to the president) and his successor.

The reason is that since Julio Chávez won office in 2004, it has not been the mayor (or the president, for that matter) who decides how to spend the funds in Torres's budget. Instead, through a unique participatory budget, modeled in part after the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre's famed experiment in direct democracy, these decisions are made directly by citizens through a series of community and district-level assemblies. Unlike many Venezuelan municipalities, where there is more revolutionary talk than walk, the changes Torres has undergone as a result of participatory budgeting (PB) are dramatic and undeniable. However, the path to popular power has been more “crooked” than straight because, while Hugo Chávez may not be the tinpot dictator he is often portrayed as in the mainstream US media, his revolution is hardly free of contradiction.

The origins of PB in Torres date back to 2002, when a national law was passed mandating PB throughout Venezuela. This law, inspired by Porto Alegre, was meant to function through the establishment of Local Public Planning Councils (CLPPs). Despite support from President Chávez, the implementation of the CLPP law has been highly uneven because of opposition from local elites and national bureaucrats in Torres and throughout Venezuela. Oropeza, mayor of Torres from 2000 to 2004, was

Gabriel Hetland, a former Nation intern, is a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley.

responsible for establishing a CLPP in accordance with the law. He had won office with support from the MVR (Fifth Republic Movement), Hugo Chávez's party until the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) was formed in 2007. But unlike Julio Chávez, whom he soundly defeated in the 2000 election, Oropeza, who is from a wealthy landowning family, is no revolutionary. The mayor complied with the letter of the 2002 law and directed his administration to set up a CLPP, but he defied the law's spirit and refused to recognize the results of the PB that the CLPP had spent months preparing.

Ironically, while the (Hugo) Chávez administration was responsible for putting PB on the map, in Torres and throughout Venezuela, it took the election of a non-Chavista to actually establish it there. The key event was the 2004 mayoral election, which had been thrown into disarray in late 2003, when then-mayor Oropeza left the MVR to join the opposition, where he received the backing of the local media and agrarian elite. Lara's Chavista governor, Luís Reyes Reyes, moved to fill the void, offering the MVR's support to a candidate known for his past affiliation with one of the traditional parties. The third candidate in the race was Julio Chávez, a little-known rabble-rouser supported by a small leftist party along with local social movements. While Chávez had long identified with the Bolivarian Revolution, this was the second time in four years he had run for mayor *against* the official Chavista establishment.

In a tight three-way race, Julio Chávez narrowly emerged as the victor. Upon taking office, he immediately convened a Municipal Constituent Assembly modeled after Venezuela's 1999 national constitutional assembly. For the next three months, hundreds of ordinary Torrenses rewrote the ordinances guiding their municipality. Chávez recalls that local and regional MVR leaders viewed this as "anarchy" and said it would never work. The National Electoral Council rejected the municipality's request to hold a referendum on the new ordinances. This would not be the only time grassroots democracy was opposed by the national government. Eladio "Lalo" Paez, head of Torres's Office of Citizenship Participation, explained, "We're constantly facing resistance from the national ministry." Chávez also faced considerable opposition from the municipal council, even though eight of its nine members were in the Chavista alliance. According to Miguel "Chicho" Medina, a social movement leader who oversees municipal support of communes (aggregations of several communal councils), Reyes Reyes "never forgave Julio for beating his candidate." Medina says Reyes Reyes even mounted a "parallel city hall," funneling thousands of dollars to a municipal councilor and close confidante of his while denying the mayor's requests for assistance. In order to overcome the municipal council's refusal to recognize the results of the 2005 PB, Chávez mobilized hundreds of supporters, who occupied the council and refused to leave until the budget they had spent months discussing was approved. He says, "I had to fight against my own party; they thought I was crazy to give up my power."

Over the course of multiple visits to Venezuela between

2007 and 2011 as part of my fieldwork for a PhD, I gained extensive firsthand knowledge of Torres's PB. Having grown up in the United States and spent years critiquing the shortcomings of representative democracy, I was impressed to see ordinary men and women making decisions about how to spend scarce government resources.

Unlike local governments in most of the world, where budget decisions are made by a mayor and city council, Torres's participatory budget begins in the municipality's 550-plus communal councils. Communal councils are civic associations of 200–400 families in urban communities, twenty to forty in rural ones, tasked with governance and development functions. The first step of PB is a "participatory diagnosis," in which council volunteers map out their community's resources and needs. Next, a citizens' assembly is held, in which communal council members (all adults living in the community, with 30 percent attendance required for a quorum) come together to discuss and vote on the community's priorities and choose a community delegate. Delegates from each of the municipality's seventeen parishes (the country's lowest administrative unit) then take their community's

'I had to fight against my own party; they thought I was crazy to give up my power.'

—Julio Chávez, former mayor of Torres

priorities to a parish assembly, where municipal officials explain how to transform proposals into projects and collect each community's priority list. About a month later, during a second parish assembly, delegates discuss project proposals and make binding decisions about budget allocations. As Julio Chávez is fond of saying, "The mayor can't even veto these decisions."

Every year, in popular assemblies throughout Torres, communal council delegates—the vast majority of them ordinary people—discuss a range of issues, from sewage and electricity to housing, education and healthcare. These discussions are both concrete (e.g., debates over whether and how to fund roads, schools and drainage systems) and abstract, with delegates broaching subjects like class inequality, communal solidarity and fairness. One of the most exciting aspects of PB is that for the thousands of Torrenses who participate, democracy is not a distant ideal but a vibrant part of their everyday lives.

Democracy, of course, involves disagreement, and PB in Torres is far from frictionless. While assemblies can often come close to philosopher Jürgen Habermas's lofty notion of the public sphere, in which deliberation is guided solely by "the force of the better argument," the rough-and-tumble process can also resemble a rugby scrum. As Lalo Paez often told me, the PB is a work in progress. He observed that "sometimes only four or five people will speak" in assemblies, but he's hopeful that recent changes will allow for more even participation, with his goal being "to make sure that there is input from every family." Paez also singled out "individualism" as a big problem, noting that some delegates think only about their own community rather than look at the needs of all.

Though far from perfect, Torres's PB is an impressive example of popular power, with decision-making authority resting with community delegates rather than bureaucrats or party leaders. Following an assembly in the mountainous parish of Manuel Murillo, I asked a teacher whether he thought PB really made sense. "Why not just leave the budget to the mayor?" I asked. Attentive to my nationality, he responded, "Why not? I'm equal to the president of the United States. If he can make decisions, why can't I?" A man standing nearby chimed in, "In the past, government officials would stay in their air-conditioned offices all day and make decisions there. They never even set foot in our communities. So who do you think can make a better decision about what we need, an official in his office who has never come to our community, or someone who is from the community?" I heard similar sentiments in community after community, showing that in addition to producing roads, health centers and schools, PB has generated an impressive level of support for the simple yet subversive idea that ordinary people should have decision-making authority over issues affecting their lives.

Torres's PB has also helped significantly reduce—though not entirely eliminate, as municipal officials sometimes claim—corruption and patronage. By improving the transparency of the budget process, PB has made it much more difficult for unscrupulous officials to engage in the formerly widespread practice of *el diesmo*, a reference to the 10 percent fee charged to local contractors in exchange for municipal contracts.

And while Chavistas outnumber non-Chavistas in PB assemblies, this is largely a reflection of the fact that, electorally speaking, Chavismo is much stronger than the opposition in Torres, especially in rural areas. Municipal officials like Lalo Paez remain vigilant about the need to maintain pluralism, which is under threat in parts of Venezuela (as my research in Caracas shows). The general success of Torres officials in doing so is confirmed by conversations with local communal council activists of all political stripes, who regularly told me, "We don't discuss politics in communal councils."

Participants in PB made it clear that the process is open to all. As one delegate told me, "It doesn't matter what party or color you have." And the degree of openness in Torres is a far cry from the past, when the traditional parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI, thoroughly controlled the neighborhood associations (precursors to the communal councils). Myriam Gimenez, a neighborhood association *cum* communal council activist, recounts, "When AD ruled, everything went to the Adeccos. When COPEI ruled, everything went to the Copeyanos."

Participatory budgeting has produced many concrete gains over the years. The pages of *Poder Popular* and *Comuna*, a newspaper and magazine produced by the municipality's Office of the Press, are filled with reports of the hundreds of houses, thousands of square feet of asphalt and many more projects that have resulted from PB, sometimes in conjunction with other sources of funding. During my months of traveling throughout Torres, I was told many stories of communities stretching resources beyond what they had been given. This is a testament to the dedication of citizens and local government officials rather than a reflection of the municipality's resources. Torres is, in fact, quite poor and highly dependent upon the central government

for transfers. Julio Chávez's government did, however, municipalize the local tax collection service, which had been privatized by a previous administration. This allowed his government to take in four times the taxes collected before.

Torres's PB has also been a political success for Chávez. In 2006 Hugo Chávez appointed him as the only mayor on his Presidential Commission on Popular Power. This even led Reyes Reyes to come around, offering belated praise to a process he had tried to destroy. In 2010 Chávez was elected to the National Assembly with an impressive 55 percent of the vote (one of the best results achieved by the PSUV in a difficult election). While Chávez's rise appears to have partially blunted his radicalism, the fire in his belly has not been extinguished, as demonstrated by his prominent role in a 2010 effort to form a "radical current" in the PSUV, despite vocal opposition from the president. And Chávez's departure from Torres has not ended PB. According to Myriam Gimenez, who has at times been critical of him, "The process of deepening the implementation of the PB continues."

Torres's success has inspired imitations elsewhere in Venezuela and Latin America. In 2010 Chicho Medina traveled regularly to the municipality of Yare, in the state of Miranda, where officials were launching a Municipal Constituent Assembly modeled after the one in Torres. Scholars, activists and officials from around the world have traveled to Torres to learn about—and in some cases attempt to copy—the municipality's PB. Chávez has spoken about Torres in Ecuador, Argentina, Guatemala and throughout Venezuela. He has also done so in Milwaukee and Chicago, where an experiment in PB is being conducted in that city's Forty-ninth Ward under Alderman Joe Moore—a sign that the changes taking place south of the border may be migrating northward.

There are signs that PB may be catching on in other US cities as well. In Oakland local activists, several of whom participated in Occupy Oakland, have formed a group called the Community Democracy Project, which is preparing a ballot initiative for the November 2012 election to bring PB to Oakland (I gave a presentation about Torres to CDP last fall, and have since become an active member).

Many lessons can be taken from Torres, but two stand out. It is first and foremost a reminder of what democracy—real democracy, that is, not the dysfunctional democracy that exists in the United States—is truly about: giving ordinary people control over the decisions that affect their lives. And second, it helps challenge simplistic assumptions about Venezuela, from starry-eyed leftist activists as well as from State Department officials and mainstream journalists.

My research suggests that claims about Hugo Chávez's dictatorial ways are overblown. At the same time, there is undeniable evidence that MVR and PSUV leaders have sought to increase their power, and have done so in ways that are inimical to the construction of participatory democracy. Torres's PB shows that democratic deepening—in which ordinary citizens of all political persuasions are able to participate in decision-making in ways that go far beyond voting in elections—is happening in Venezuela today. It appears, however, that a bit of Brechtian crookedness may be needed to get there. ■