

**Tell me a little about your life in Venezuela before you came to Spain. Were you working? Studying?**

Yes. I had worked as a journalist for more than fourteen years in Venezuela before I came to Spain. I studied for a master's degree in Barcelona for three years, and also worked there.

I decided to return to Venezuela when I finished my studies. President Chávez had died. I thought there could be a positive change. I decided to work with the Venezuelan opposition for elections, to win support to effect change.

I realized that it would be very difficult, that there were many obstacles in the system to a fair election. I was there for a period, working in logistics with the opposition team in my city, Barquisimeto, in the Venezuelan interior.

When the election occurred, we saw many errors, many irregularities. We thought of it as a trick, an unfair game. The government used many systems to control the population, to threaten them, to create the fear that you could have problems if you voted for the opposition, that you could lose your job. We saw threats from military figures when the electoral centers were opened. The opposition didn't have the same rights, the same security. Some centers didn't open on time.

The public feared that the government could control (the election), that it would know for whom one had voted.

**They didn't vote in private? The government could know who had voted for whom?**

It was an electronic system. Digital. To vote, you must use your fingerprint. Then you could vote. The whole system is digital.

We knew that these digital systems could be revised, and "violated." Even when opponents and the government said that it was a secure system, many citizens shared the belief that this wasn't so, that (the vote) could be controlled, even changed.

**If you had to choose one event that decided you, what would it be? You decided to change your country, from Venezuela to Spain. What was the event that changed your mind?**

I studied journalism, had worked for years as a journalist. I can see the difference between working in a system that permits the free expression of opinion, and a system that does not permit it. (In Venezuela), I could see that journalists' rights had been restricted.

I also could see that major changes in the economic structure of the country had occurred, that had impaired the system. There were problems in the free market, (the government) could take away your business at any time, there were ... many threats, upon the educational system, the health system. We saw that the system was deteriorating very quickly. For me, changes in the financial system were very bad for the public.

I realized that I could not practice my profession with freedom, that I could not cover my expenses. It doesn't matter what work I would like ... there was a change in the financial system, a big devaluation. At the start of that same year, in January, on the first day, I was earning four hundred euros, which was good for a typical professional, in Venezuela. At the end of that year, I was earning forty dollars. From four hundred to forty.

It wasn't possible on the same salary to live there. I couldn't cover my expenses. As I had already lived outside of Venezuela, I said, "I don't see how this can improve, every time it gets worse."

And now, five years later, I see that this is so. I think I made the correct decision, because in Venezuela every time it gets worse.

**Hugo Chávez has been publicized as a hero, but you are a native. What are your impressions now, and what do you think that those outside of Venezuela do not understand of Chávez and also the situation there?**

People think that there is a fight in Venezuela between two sectors: a rich sector and the poor, who want a populist leader who will help them. A gentle socialism. I don't see it so. It is not what I have lived.

I don't belong to a group of financial leaders, or to a socially high group. I am working class, a typical professional, like many people

in my country. My standard of living deteriorated greatly from the system in place now. For me, this is not socialism. Well, if you like, for Chávez it was a socialism, what he gave was communism, it was the system that he wanted to install.

It is an extremely restrictive system. There are no liberties. You must do what the government requires, even when it is going to harm you. The system that Chávez offered us was of equality for others, but an equality that has a very high price, that causes harm in many sectors. There isn't negotiation. He imposed only what he wanted, what he thought was correct. The sectors that didn't think like him had to disappear.

**Maduro is the president. What does Maduro want for Venezuela, in your opinion? Does he want power, or does he want to improve the situation in Venezuela? What are your impressions of this president?**

Well, I don't think he makes the decisions for Venezuela. I think that he is only an intermediary between those who really decide and the governmental structure. I think that the guiding principles of what happens in Venezuela are decided in Cuba, because I think that the system in Venezuela now is controlled by the Cuban system.

**Really?**

Yes. We know that before the government of Maduro was established, until now, Maduro took frequent trips to Cuba. Chávez was (also) in Cuba for many months during his sickness. Moreover, there had been many negotiations between the president of Cuba, President Castro, and the leaders of the Venezuelan government.

There are many important Cuban sectors that exist in Venezuela. There is an important medical group that intervenes in the health system. In the sector of military intelligence, the leaders there, we know that many (of these) figures come from Cuba. In the system of identification, the control of identity of Venezuelans, and the control of assets, the complete registration of assets, services and properties is controlled by a system that the Cubans manage.

So, we think that the decisions about what goes on in Venezuela have less to do with what benefits the population than with what will make the government stronger and maintain it in power.

**You still have family members there. What news do they offer of the life there today?**

It is difficult to live there. Eighty percent of the jobs have disappeared. There are people who still live with government posts -- the professors, public workers -- but the private industry almost doesn't exist. Only small businesses.

My sister is a university professor, for example, and the university almost doesn't function. My brother works internationally by internet. It's very difficult, because the internet doesn't work every day. Every day there are drops in power service at various hours.

The public transportation system doesn't exist, because there isn't enough money to buy spare parts for the cars. It's difficult to buy gasoline, because there are days when there isn't gasoline. Things that are difficult to understand in Venezuela. There aren't medications, either.

As for food, there are days when it is very difficult to get it. You have to go to the stores every day to see if (what you want) is there, and if you can buy it, because the prices change all the time.

**Why doesn't Maduro leave his post? He can see that his country is suffering. Why doesn't he want to leave?**

I'm not sure that Maduro is interested in the population of Venezuela. I think he is there to maintain himself in power. I think that he belongs to an environment that demands that he so maintain himself. As I said earlier, I think that he doesn't make his own decisions. I think he responds to a group that asks him to continue.

It is a power structure. There are various businesses there. The petroleum business, that has fallen much, but exists, and other businesses that they have. The international businesses, a system of paramilitary relations with Colombia, structures of managing resources and money. There are people who say, for example, there are businesses with coltan, that there are narcotrafficking businesses, that there is extraction of gold, that there is support of various military groups, as much of Colombia as of the Middle East. All of these groups have an interest, and want him to continue, if only for the time.

**Let's talk a little about the move to Spain. I think that you lived in a refugee center after you arrived here. How did this happen?**

I arrived in Barcelona, and wanted to continue with my doctorate studies. During this time in Venezuela there was a very large protest. One of the main leaders of the opposition, Leopoldo López, was put in jail on an unjust accusation. A protest began in many parts of Venezuela, a very strong street protest. A constant fight.

I (had) participated with this opposition protest group, and this movement was very important to me. (But) my family asked me not to return to Venezuela. It would be dangerous, because they could see that I could associate with this group, and that my vocation as a journalist would be rapidly seen.

When I decided to travel, the airlines of Venezuela, that flew to Venezuela, stopped flying. There was a time when there were no flights, either to enter or leave. At this time, I solicited asylum. The system accepted my request, and during three years I received protection. They offered me a term to live and receive support in a refugee center in Madrid. I accepted, and I came to Madrid to live in the center.

**You lived in a refugee center! It must have been a very difficult change. Was it terrifying, to come alone to another country and live in a refugee center? How did you feel?**

It wasn't easy. I was hoping for more comfort, I was accustomed to living at a higher level, but it was a good center, a good place. It was like a student residence. You have to share your room, the service, and eat in a cafeteria with many people.

I learned that I was one of many who needed help. There were at least seventy people who had come from Syria, fleeing from the war, and Africans who had come from different places, twenty or thirty Africans. And other people of different places. I was one more there.

The social assistants told me: you don't need help. You speak Spanish, and you can work in what you have studied. You must continue to live your life. Do what you have to do. You must continue alone.

It was difficult for me to think ... I was in a (new) city, I had

more contacts in Barcelona. They helped me, they allowed me to take a course to study more. I understood that the system had been created to help people with very few resources. People had come from Africa, who had not studied, who did not know the language. They had to progress, too.

It was very difficult to adapt to my new life, to understand that I could not return to work as a journalist, at least in this moment, and that I had to continue in another way. But I accepted it. It was difficult, but I accepted, and I think it was a good decision.

**I have the impression of a very strong person emotionally, because I can't imagine myself in your situation. Have your friends told you that you have special courage, in this respect? I understand that there are others in the same situation.**

When you take the decision to leave your country, there is a moment when you realize that you can't return.