

## The BARRON of Brooklyn Eyes Washington

**Charles Barron: "Castro has free education. So tell Michael Bloomberg and all of these folks here; be like Castro! And be like Hugo Chavez! And give us free healthcare and free education!â€•"**

[Political Arena]On a recent Sunday small crowd stood on the northeast corner of Sonny Abubadika Carson Park where Linden Boulevard meets Vermont Avenue to hear former Black Panther, Councilman Charles Barron, announce that he's running against incumbent Congressman Ed Towns. Barron has stood out as a pioneer in allocating development funds for his district, which covers parts of East New York, Brownsville, East Flatbush, and Canarsie. He criticizes U.S. foreign policy in Latin America and Africa, insisting that many countries in the region, even those unfriendly with the United States, are doing a better job in providing the social security net he says has been neglected in this country for his constituents: healthcare and jobs. Barron and his supporters maintain that his campaign rival, 15th-term Congressman Ed Towns, like many other politicians in this country, has promised but not delivered on these pressing needs in low-income communities of color. The 10th city council district that Barron represents is characterized by modest town houses, small yards, and wide boulevards lined with fast food chains. Thirty-four percent of the population in of East New York and New Lots lives in poverty, according to the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Moreover, the agency ranked the area "below average" in their 2006 Community Health Profile, based on criteria which include access to a primary physician, obesity --one out of every three adults-- and an above average infant mortality rate as compared to the rest of New York City. The agency also ranked the neighborhood 36th among 42 in life expectancy rates in 2004; recent data were not available for this article. Councilman Barron has made quite a name for himself while serving the majority Black and Latino community since 2001. A few years ago, Barron raised \$1.2 million to refurbish Sonny Abubadika Carson Park, formerly Linden-Gerschwin Park. Sonny Carson is a legend in this part of Brooklyn and elsewhere in the City. He was a prominent Brooklyn Black nationalist and community activist who died in 2002. He became renowned when he started storming crack houses and driving them from the neighborhood. Barron also obtained \$12.5 million for the construction of a recreation center, just a few blocks from the park. Overall, Barron has been credited with having the most units of affordable housing built in his district than any other council member in New York. "We need jobs; you know that," he was saying, the other day, when he formally announced his run. "But they ain't delivering nothing! We need affordable housing. We call for universal health care. Castro has free health care, Hugo Chavez has free healthcare. What's wrong with America?" he added, referring to retired Cuban leader who still wields influence, and Venezuela's president. "We need a free education system. CUNY should be free! Castro has free education. So tell Michael Bloomberg and all of these folks here; be like Castro! And be like Hugo Chavez! And give us free healthcare and free education!" Barron told the crowd. Barron's statements in support of international governments and politicians that the U.S. opposes have stirred much publicized controversy. At the park, Barron explained why he also supported Muammar al-Quathafi, who was killed following the NATO-intervention there. "In Libya, there was low unemployment, no homelessness, people had free healthcare, the infant mortality rate was better under Quathafi," Barron said. He went on to assert that the life expectancy rose from 57 to 79, and the literacy rate from a mere 10 percent to 90 percent in Libya and added, "When a country like the United States has the material capacity to do all that for its people and they don't, they're not fit to govern." Although Barron is running in the Democratic primary, many fellow Democrats like Councilman Lewis A. Fidler in neighboring District 46, do not support him because of his foreign policy stances. "I'm a little overwhelmed by his anti-Israel, pro-Quathafi and pro-Mugabe sentiments. His election to Congress would be tragic," Fidler said. "No matter what party Barron runs for, I will not be supporting him." Barron has been a strong supporter of Robert Mugabe, the long-time Zimbabwe president who was widely criticized by the U.S. and most Western countries and accused of repression. He invited Mugabe to speak at City Hall a few years ago. Barron is confident that he has tapped into a global response to larger economic issues. "People are rising up all over the world. Egypt hasn't completed its revolution. They

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still have a military government. Globalization, imperialistic wars, and capitalism are failing. People are hurting. Unemployment and poverty are global. Because the greedy always want to have more than what they really need at the expense of the poor," Barron said. Addressing the economic crisis felt here and abroad, Barron added, "Capitalism is crumbling. I think it's a failed system. Capitalism has failed to feed all the people that have to be fed, to house all the people that need housing, employ all the people that have been employed, and to provide healthcare " That's why we're using electoral politics as a tactic, as an arena to raise those issues through the voice of the 99 percent." Barron is ready to dig into the political trenches. He is a member of the Freedom Party, a Black and Latino-led party, which was founded on the principle of "a structural transformation of the political and economic system." He was also a candidate for the New York gubernatorial run on the party's ticket. Barron says that he is running in the Democratic primary because his party has not yet been registered in the State of New York. "We need to get busy. Y'all ready to win?" Barron asked, pumping up the crowd the other day. He then thanked his volunteer staff for their help. The crowd cheered, chanting "Charles Barron for Congress! Charles Barron for Congress!" After Barron's speech, excited conversations peppered the crowd. A young man exclaimed, "We're freedom fighters!" A middle-aged man, Brother Wilfred Muhammad, was selling bean pies, desserts filled with custard and mashed navy beans, for \$3 each out of a cardboard box, enthusiastically expressed his support. His supporters' cheer belies the fact that Barron has a long road ahead in his campaign. In the 2010 gubernatorial race, Barron ranked on average second-to-last in the Kings County's assembly districts when he ran on the Freedom Party ticket. Nevertheless, he received admiration for voting "no" on renaming the 59th Street Bridge to the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge in Queens last March 23rd. Barron has attracted new supporters too like Raymond Burke, a transit worker from Queens in his early twenties. Burke began campaigning for Barron in 2010 and recently joined the Freedom Party. Despite criticism Barron has received for his support of Quathafi and Chavez from some quarters, Burke lauds his candidate's positions because he said that these international figures have been steadily "resistant to American foreign policy." The newly developed Freedom Party foreign policy agenda supports Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Palestine, as well as an end to financing wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Burke stressed that there is only way Barron can win this year. "Barron has a shot if we can get people to come out and vote," Burke said. He explained that aside from voter drives, he has gone door-to-door campaigning for Barron and handing out leaflets. Above all, Burke stresses the value of "face time" to discuss issues. "Talking to people is what's most important," Burke said. Although the congressional district, where Barron is vying for the seat, is characterized by an almost solid block of Democratic voters, only 381,439 total were registered to vote in 2011, less than half of the overall 655,000 residents. Burke asserts that the discrepancy between voter registration and turnout has clouded Barron's successes in past runs for higher office. However, Hank Sheinkopf, a spokesman for Ed Towns, does not think Barron is a viable contender for the congressional seat. He says that Barron's pro-Cuba statements will just add another blow to Barron's already slim chances for election, emphasizing Towns' experience in addressing the same economic issues Barron mentioned during his launch. "Towns took on the insurance companies and the banks. Barron hasn't," he said. "Ed Towns has a record in Congress. Barron doesn't." Evidently, the Barron supporters did not get Sheinkopf's memo. Pheona Grant, 29, is a Barron supporter who sees great hope in his potential victory. "If Barron gets the Congressional seat, it will be a major step toward change," she said. Grant went on to describe Congressman Towns as a "lackey" for not standing up for the needs of the community he represents, and added, "When Towns came to town hall meetings, he would promise things, but then he wouldn't follow through. He's lost the passion of the people," Grant said of Barron's opponent. Grant, a medical coordinator for a non-profit, stood next to Jelani Johnson, Barron's stepson, whom she knew growing up in East Flatbush. Pushing his grandmother in a wheelchair as they were leaving to catch a bus to an organizing meeting for the Barron campaign, Johnson paused to interject his take on

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Towns.&#8220;In our community, we feel that we are not necessarily represented by Mr. Towns. He will accept our endorsement, our money, but when it comes time after the funds have been allocated, our community does not get anything. The problem is a poor redistribution of resources. It doesn't make sense that our communities are not getting the resources that we need while other communities have received benefits of financial support,&#8221; Johnson said.He elaborated on how his stepfather has touched a nerve of growing discontent in this country, one that his community has already been feeling for quite some time.&#8220;Most of the folks in the Occupy movement are now experiencing from a physical and from a tension perspective what it is our minority communities in Brooklyn has received for many years,&#8221; he said. &#8220;If our rights are continuously abused, I wouldn't be surprised to see something like Egypt or Libya happen here. People will stand up and say, hey listen, we want our voice to be heard.&#8221;At that moment, three police officers strolled up to the intersection and addressed Barron.&#8220;What are you doing here?&#8221; they asked him. A veteran Panther, Barron replied, &#8220;We're making revolution!&#8221;There was a pause before the officers felt at ease with Barron's charm again. Laughter resumed, and Barron joked with a photographer, telling him not to take pictures of him standing next to the police. &#8220;This will ruin my cred!&#8221; he quipped.