

TEN YEARS OF 'BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION' IN VENEZUELA. HUGO CHAVEZ BETWEEN CHARISMA AND BUREAUCRACY

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For one decade, comandante Hugo Chávez has been ruling Venezuela, a ruined country that keeps on going downhill. There is a price to pay for the negative impact of the global economic crisis, an overblown state budget largely financed by the export of oil, dwindling oil revenues, the disastrous consequences of a purely distributive policy, and other calamitous developments in the past. Even so, a respectable majority of the population voted for the constitutional amendment which the comandante had been striving for in the referendum of February 15, a great success for Mr Chávez. There is now nothing to bar the way to unlimited re-election.

After the failure of the constitutional referendum of December 2, 2007, the President's successes were few and far between, and familiar problems like violent crime, inflation, unemployment, administrative inefficiency, and ubiquitous corruption even escalated. The success of February 15 is owed mostly to the creation of a new party organization. At a time when the personal attractiveness of the comandante himself is waning, any losses that threatened were apparently compensated for by the efficiency of a tightly led party well trained in campaigning skills.

The foundation of the country's Socialist Unity Party certainly represents a landmark after ten years of revolution, although it is hardly likely to become a power factor because its cadres will obey the head of the state and the party anyway. In that sense, the recently-founded PSUV is hardly more than another 'army' under the command of the revolutionary leader. And the command hierarchy works, as two recent spinoffs learned to their cost: whereas the Communist Party, small but rich in tradition, was brought to heel again after veering off, the left-wing socialist Patria Para Todos (PPT) faction stoutly stuck to its demand that unlimited re-election should be extended to mayors and governors. At first, Mr Chávez and his party threatened to destroy the rogues. In January, however, the President made their demand his own, although his strategic aim was to harness those that would be thus elected to the cart of his own personalist project.

The new state party maintains that its membership exceeds 6.2 million even now, although the number of those who voted for Chávist deputies at the last regional elections was no more than 5.4 million. The opposition won 4.1 million votes, a defeat which it tried to gloss over in vain, especially so as the percentage distribution – 55 for Mr Chávez and only 45 for his opponents – was clear enough.

Although Mr Chávez emerged victorious, the outcome of the regional elections must have been a blow to him because the 'democratic alternative', as the opposition styles itself, now occupies a number of positions of symbolic and strategic importance. Thus, it provides the lord mayor of the capital, the mayors of four out of five districts in the capital, the governor of Miranda, the mayor of the poor quarter of Petare, and numerous officials in its own strongholds. Therefore, the result of November 23 was certainly not a 'spontaneous mass approval' for Mr Chávez.

When the President demanded the consent of parliament to the referendum that would entitle him to unlimited re-election, he said, 'I shall be here for as long as God wants me to and the nation orders me to'. These words stem from the thinking of his ideologist, Norberto Ceresole, who conceived the idea of a nation giving a military command to its leader. God knows, Mr Ceresole is a scintillating figure: a member of the Argentinean montanero guerrilla in the seventies, he supported the left-wing military dictatorship in Peru, became a member of the Academy of Sciences in the Soviet Union, and represented Hezbollah in Spain. On several occasions, Mr Chávez has avowed his friendship with the man whose ideology paved the way for him in Venezuela. When Mr Chávez was first elected ten years ago, Mr Ceresole let it be known that 'the order given by the Venezuelan nation on December 6, 1998 is clear and inexorable. It was a physical person, not an abstract idea or some "party", that was "deputised" by the nation to wield power.' On December 6, 2008, Mr Chávez returned to this idea: 'We are [...] in a situation where a nation gives orders and a man obeys.'

Some of the things Mr Ceresole said could not be clearer: 'The Venezuelan nation has produced a caudillo. [The] nature of the Venezuelan process can be neither distorted nor misinterpreted. We are looking at a nation which has given an order to its leader. It is his duty to comply with that order. [...] This is why the only thing with which we must be concerned now is to maintain this relationship between a nation and its leader. [...] As long as this relationship can be preserved, the process will go on.' Following this lead, the adherents of the comandante will hardly say 'Soy chavista' (I am a Chavist). Rather, they will confess, 'Estoy con el proceso' (I am part of the process).

Here is Mr Ceresole again: 'The relationship between the nation and its leader must [...] be defended. Consequently, it will be necessary to combat any attempt to "democratize" power. A nation cannot be powerful without a strong leader. Should the leader disappear, the masses would be left completely defenceless.' Thus, it was in keeping with the thinking of his former advisor when Mr Chávez let it be known that the nation had ordered him to lead it for another ten years. So there is no hope of Chavism turning democratic; instead, the recent referendum has given a more concrete shape to the nation/leader relationship. This is not a democratic process. Rather,

the referendum has replaced the democratic process. The most important bridge between the nation and its leader is the military. To that extent, the recently-founded party is not an instrument of popular participation. It is nothing but a transmission belt, a structure that is organized along military lines.

In his book *El poder y el delirio*, which was praised by Mario Vargas Llosa and others, the Mexican historian, Enrique Krauze, describes Mr Chávez and the development of Venezuela. He holds out some hope that Chavism might be overcome, especially as the opposition was closing ranks. According to Mr Krauze, what Mr Chávez has to offer relates less to socialism and more to fascism. After all, hero worship and militarism are defining characteristics of the mentality of a revolutionary leader and his movement.

In the ten years under Mr Chávez, Venezuela's revenues totalled 850 billion Dollars, more than in the four preceding decades. The question is what became of that money under the rule of a man who made the destruction of efficient administrative structures his programme and the inefficiency of governmental action his defining characteristic. In the view of the SIC journal published by the educational Centro Gumilla, which is run by Jesuits rooted in the theology of liberation who are anything but unsympathetic towards the followers of Mr Chávez, the record is sobering. Margarita López Maya, a leftist historian, believes that the Bolivarian project may collapse if the price of oil continues to decline and no socio-political consensus is reached. Talking of the fear which in his opinion is reigning in the Chavist camp, Jesuit Yovanny Bermúdez claims that Mr Chávez has struck the discourse about the poor from his agenda. Laura Weffer Cifuentes, a journalist, thinks that the civilian wing of the government has been replaced by the military wing, so that 'flying' is now impossible. José Roberto Duque, himself a member of the left, believes that 'pre-Chavinist people's organizations' will survive if the current government should come to an end. Pedro Trigo, a Jesuit, is convinced that those are in the majority who are prepared to support an alternative to Mr Chávez. Ramón Espinasa, the former chief economist of the state oil company PDVSA, thinks that his former employer is facing bankruptcy, having been fatally injured by the sack of 20,000 highly qualified employees who happened to be hostile to the regime. Finally, Arturo Peraza, another Jesuit, predicts that the Chávez project will be brought down by the internal contradiction between promising social participation to the poor and pursuing a renewal of centralism.

Now, what is the present state of the opposition? Its representatives dutifully claimed victory after the elections of November 23. However, this oft-invoked success paled after the defeat in the referendum of February. Meanwhile, self-criticism is being practiced, and the realization is dawning that internal democracy will have to be promoted and high-profile outsiders

will have to be permitted to stand for office to regain the confidence of the electorate. A look at the individual situation of the opposition parties tells us a great deal: Acción Democrática (AC) and COPEI, two traditional parties, were unable to win more than 16 and eleven mayoral posts, respectively. Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) received eight, and Primero Justicia (PJ), four. COPEI, PJ, and UNT provide one governor each. The state of Carabobo is dominated by Proyecto Venezolano. PODEMOS, which until recently sided with 'the process', obtained no more than one mayoral position.

The path of the opposition should be clear. Only an alliance comprising all its members, equipped with a convincing programme and a popular leadership, would stand a realistic chance against the comandante and his movement. Apparently, however, the looming crisis will again play into the latter's hands. Times of crisis have always been times of charisma. What is more, his victory in the referendum has burnished up the dulling lustre of Hugo Chávez.

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