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Hugo Chavez and Me

Challenging the Washington Consensus

by TARIQ ALI
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Once I asked whether he preferred enemies who hated him because they knew what he was doing or those who frothed and foamed out of ignorance. He laughed. The former was preferable, he explained, because they made him feel that he was on the right track. Hugo Chávez's death did not come as a surprise, but that does not make it easier to accept. We have lost one of the political giants of the post-communist era. Venezuela, its elites mired in corruption on a huge scale, had been considered a secure outpost of Washington and, at the other extreme, the Socialist International. Few thought of the country before his victories. After 1999, every major media outlet of the west felt obliged to send a correspondent. Since they all said the same thing (the country was supposedly on the verge of a communist-style dictatorship) they would have been better advised to pool their resources.

I first met him in 2002, soon after the military coup instigated by Washington and Madrid had failed and subsequently on numerous occasions. He had asked to see me during the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. He inquired: "Why haven't you been to Venezuela? Come soon." I did. What appealed was his bluntness and courage. What often appeared as sheer impulsiveness had been carefully thought out and then, depending on the response, enlarged by spontaneous eruptions on his part. At a time when the world had fallen silent, when centre-left and centre-right had to struggle hard to find some differences and their politicians had become desiccated machine men obsessed with making money, Chávez lit up the political landscape.

He appeared as an indestructible ox, speaking for hours to his people in a warm, sonorous voice, a fiery eloquence that made it impossible to remain indifferent. His words had a stunning resonance. His speeches were littered with homilies, continental and national history, quotes from the 19th-century revolutionary leader and president of Venezuela Simón Bolívar, pronouncements on the state of the world and songs. “Our bourgeoisie are embarrassed that I sing in public. Do you mind?” he would ask the audience. The response was a resounding “No”. He would then ask them to join in the singing and mutter, “Louder, so they can hear us in the eastern part of the city.” Once before just such a rally he looked at me and said: “You look tired today. Will you last out the evening?” I replied: “It depends on how long you’re going to speak.” It would be a short speech, he promised. Under three hours.

The Bolívarians, as Chávez’s supporters were known, offered a political programme that challenged the Washington consensus: neo-liberalism at home and wars abroad. This was the prime reason for the vilification of Chávez that is sure to continue long after his death.

Politicians like him had become unacceptable. What he loathed most was the contemptuous indifference of mainstream politicians in South America towards their own people. The Venezuelan elite is notoriously racist. They regarded the elected president of their country as uncouth and uncivilised, a *zambo* of mixed African and indigenous blood who could not be trusted. His supporters were portrayed on private TV networks as monkeys. Colin Powell had to publicly reprimand the US embassy in Caracas for hosting a party where Chávez was portrayed as a gorilla.

Was he surprised? “No,” he told me with a grim look on his face. “I live here. I know them well. One reason so many of us join the army is because all other avenues are sealed.” No longer. He had few illusions. He knew that local enemies did not seethe and plot in a vacuum. Behind them was the world’s most powerful state. For a few moments he thought Obama might be different. The military coup in Honduras disabused him of all such notions.

He had a punctilious sense of duty to his people. He was one of them. Unlike European social democrats he never believed that any improvement in humankind would come from the corporations and the bankers and said so long before the Wall Street crash of 2008. If I had to pin a label on him, I would say that he was a socialist democrat, far removed from any sectarian impulses and repulsed by the self-obsessed behaviour of various far-left sects and the blindness of their routines. He said as much when we first met.

The following year in Caracas I questioned him further on the Bolívarian project. What could be accomplished? He was very clear; much more so than some of his over-enthusiastic supporters: “I don’t believe in the dogmatic postulates of Marxist revolution. I don’t accept that we are living in a period of proletarian revolutions. All that must be revised. Reality is telling us that every day. Are we aiming in Venezuela today for the abolition of private property or a classless society? I don’t think so. But if I’m told that because of that reality you can’t do anything to help the poor, the people who have made this country rich through their labour – and never forget that some of it was slave labor – then I say: ‘We part company.’ I will never accept that there can be no redistribution of wealth in society. Our upper classes don’t even like paying taxes. That’s one reason they hate me. We said: ‘You must pay your taxes.’ I believe it’s better to die in battle,

rather than hold aloft a very revolutionary and very pure banner, and do nothing ... That position often strikes me as very convenient, a good excuse ... Try and make your revolution, go into combat, advance a little, even if it's only a millimetre, in the right direction, instead of dreaming about utopias.”

I remember sitting next to an elderly, modestly attired woman at one of his public rallies. She questioned me about him. What did I think? Was he doing well? Did he not speak too much? Was he not too rash at times? I defended him. She was relieved. It was his mother, worried that perhaps she had not brought him up as well as she should have done: “We always made sure that he read books as a child.” This passion for reading stayed with him. History, fiction and poetry were the loves of his life: “Like me, Fidel is an insomniac. Sometimes we're reading the same novel. He rings at 3am and asks: ‘Well, have you finished? What did you think?’ And we argue for another hour.”

It was the spell of literature that in 2005 led him to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Cervantes's great novel in a unique fashion. The ministry of culture reprinted a million copies of Don Quixote and distributed them free to a million poor, but now literate, households. A quixotic gesture? No. The magic of art can't transform the universe, but it can open up a mind. Chávez was confident that the book would be read now or later.

The closeness to Castro has been portrayed as a father-son relationship. This is only partially the case. Last year a huge crowd had gathered outside the hospital in Caracas, where Chávez was meant to be recuperating from cancer treatment, and their chants got louder and louder. Chávez ordered a loudspeaker system on the rooftop. He then addressed the crowd. Watching this scene on Telesur in Havana, Castro was shocked. He rang the director of the hospital: “This is Fidel Castro. You should be sacked. Get him back into bed and tell him I said so.”

Above the friendship, Chávez saw Castro and Che Guevara in a historical frame. They were the 20th-century heirs of Bolívar and his friend Antonio José de Sucre. They tried to unite the continent, but it was like ploughing the sea. Chávez got closer to that ideal than the quartet he admired so much. His successes in Venezuela triggered a continental reaction: Bolivia and Ecuador saw victories. Brazil under Lula and Dilma did not follow the social model but refused to allow the west to pit them against each other. It was a favoured trope of western journalists: Lula is better than Chávez. Only last year Lula publicly declared that he supported Chávez, whose importance for “our continent” should never be underestimated.

The image of Chávez most popular in the west was that of an oppressive *caudillo*. Had this been true I would wish for more of them. The Bolívarian constitution, opposed by the Venezuelan opposition, its newspapers and TV channels and the local CNN, plus western supporters, was approved by a large majority of the population. It is the only constitution in the world that affords the possibility of removing an elected president from office via a referendum based on collecting sufficient signatures. Consistent only in their hatred for Chávez, the opposition tried to use this mechanism in 2004 to remove him. Regardless of the fact that many of the signatures were those of dead people, the Venezuelan government decided to accept the challenge.

I was in Caracas a week before the vote. When I met Chávez at the Miraflores palace he was poring over the opinion polls in great detail. It might be close. “And if you lose?” I asked. “Then I will resign,” he replied without hesitation. He won.

Did he ever tire? Get depressed? Lose confidence? “Yes,” he replied. But it was not the coup attempt or the referendum. It was the strike organised by the corrupted oil unions and backed by the middle-classes that worried him because it would affect the entire population, especially the poor: “Two factors helped sustain my morale. The first was the support we retained throughout the country. I got fed up sitting in my office. So with one security guard and two comrades I drove out to listen to people and breathe better air. The response moved me greatly. A woman came up to me and said: ‘Chávez follow me, I want to show you something.’ I followed her into her tiny dwelling. Inside, her husband and children were waiting for the soup to be cooked. ‘Look at what I’m using for fuel ... the back of our bed. Tomorrow I’ll burn the legs, the day after the table, then the chairs and doors. We will survive, but don’t give up now.’ On my way out the kids from the gangs came and shook hands. ‘We can live without beer. You make sure you screw these motherfuckers.’”

What was the inner reality of his life? For anyone with a certain level of intelligence, of character and culture, his or her natural leanings, emotional and intellectual, hang together, constitute a whole not always visible to everyone. He was a divorcee, but affection for his children and grandchildren was never in doubt. Most of the women he loved, and there were a few, described him as a generous lover, and this was long after they had parted.

What of the country he leaves behind? A paradise? Certainly not. How could it be, given the scale of the problems? But he leaves behind a very changed society in which the poor felt they had an important stake in the government. There is no other explanation for his popularity. Venezuela is divided between his partisans and detractors. He died undefeated, but the big tests lie ahead. The system he created, a social democracy based on mass mobilisations, needs to progress further. Will his successors be up to the task? In a sense, that is the ultimate test of the Bolívarian experiment.

Of one thing we can be sure. His enemies will not let him rest in peace. And his supporters? His supporters, the poor throughout the continent and elsewhere, will see him as a political leader who promised and delivered social rights against heavy odds; as someone who fought for them and won.