

A powerful force for change

PROFILE OF HUGO CHÁVEZ FRÍAS

PRESIDENT, BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA

President Hugo Chávez is a visionary who has initiated a social revolution in Venezuela based on his concept of a 'new socialism', involving the co-operative participation of all parts of society in the management of local issues. This revolution aims to transform the country into a self-sufficient and fully developed State or a 'small major power', as he defines it.

To understand how Venezuela embarked on this radically different course, one must understand both President Chávez's background and the existing social conditions within the country at the time.

Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías was born in 1954, the second son of poorly-paid schoolteachers of mixed Amerindian, African and Spanish descent, who raised their five children in a palm-thatched house just outside the town of Sabaneta in Barinas province. After graduating from the local high school he opted for an army

career, attending the Academy of Military Sciences and subsequently Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, where he studied political science.

Even as a student, Chávez espoused left-wing nationalist ideas that have come to be known as 'Bolivarism', after the 19th century pan-Americanist revolutionary leader Simón Bolívar.

Bolívar, the continentalist liberator of South America from Spanish rule, has been a great inspiration to Chávez, whose 'Bolivarian revolution' is composed of a distinctive ideology with a set of broad objectives and principles designed to mobilise Venezuelan society. It provides a coherent direction for national policy and, it can be argued, presents an alternative to the traditional capitalist market model.

Chávez's Bolivarism is an eclectic bundle of ideas. Central to his vision is the concept of a unified South America, comprising a group of co-operating nation States forming an independent power bloc. He combines this with heartfelt nationalism, vigorously defending Venezuelan sovereignty. He reconciles his nationalism and continentalism with the idea of creating a 'co-operativist' society in Venezuela which, he hopes, will become the new economic model of the region.

The President's domestic model of 'new socialism' combines State intervention in the economy, a role for the private business sector and the mobilisation of society via organised grass root movements, but is naturally tolerant to political opposition and sticks to constitutional structures and procedures. The model promotes 'participative democracy' at the local level and involves the idea of 'endogenous development' projects which pull disparate sectors of society

together in the pursuit of common goals. These projects are given impetus by 'Bolivarian circles' made up of networks and embracing ideas such as 'Catholic liberation theology' which promotes the alleviation of poverty as well as an underlying nationalist tendency which provides the rationale for encouraging conflicting and competing groups to subordinate their interests to the national interest.

During the 1998 presidential elections he won over popular support through his 'Bolivarian' mix of nationalism combined with promises of anti-corruption and poverty alleviation



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measures. In 2002 vested interests launched a coup d'état, and imprisoned Chávez for 72 hours, only to see him released by his supporters and units of the Armed Forces. Continuing later that year they called an oil industry strike, which itself petered out. In 2004, they attempted to replace him by forcing a 'recall referendum', which also failed. Since then, Chávez has launched a series of ambitious social programmes, known as 'Missions' in the areas of health, education, micro credits, literacy and professional training.

Chávez's Bolivarism is a compromise model to unite a potentially divided society and, as an experiment in social change, has the great advantage of being backed by Venezuela's oil wealth. Neither is it dependent on foreign influence or patronage. Certainly Venezuela's significant hydrocarbon resources are vital to Chávez's revolution. Venezuela enjoys the largest proven oil reserves in the Western hemisphere (79 billion barrels) and the world's largest (300 billion barrels) if one includes the Orinoco tar belt. High oil prices are key to Venezuela's prosperity.

Chávez is certainly among the hawks at OPEC's output-fixing meetings – a stance that he justifies in part by broader humanitarian and global concerns. "We are facing an unprecedented energy crisis", he warns, "in which an unstoppable increase of energy (usage) is perilously reaching record highs, as well as the incapacity of increasing oil supply and the prospect of a decline in the proven reserves of fuel worldwide. Oil is starting to become exhausted". Moreover, he argues that by 2020 "daily demand for oil will be 120 million barrels, and such demand – even without counting future increments – would consume in 20 years what humanity has used up to now. This means that more carbon dioxide will inevitably be increased, thus warming our planet even more."

Chávez responded to the devastation caused Hurricane Katrina last year by offering the affected regions both humanitarian aid and oil – an offer turned down by the Bush administration. He pointed out that "this has been a painful example of the cost of ignoring (that) the warming of the oceans is the fundamental factor behind the increase in the strength of the hurricanes." By linking concern for the people (as opposed to the government) of the United States, global warming, the need to reduce energy consumption, Chávez managed both to argue for the importance of humanitarian aid as well as promoting demands for higher energy prices that can pay for these policies

President Chávez's agenda is certainly more concerned with social equality and 'people's rights' than the kind of macro-economic factors that concern the IMF and similar bodies. Indeed, he sees many of the world's problems as deriving from a focus on economic liberalisation. "It is impractical and

unethical to sacrifice the human race by appealing in an insane manner the validity of a socio-economic model that has a galloping destructive capacity. It would be suicidal to spread it and impose it as an infallible remedy for the evils which are caused precisely by them."

"We are aware of a frightening neo-liberal globalisation", he told the United Nations, "but there is also the reality of an interconnected world that we have to face not as a problem but as a challenge. We could, on the basis of national realities, exchange knowledge, integrate markets, interconnect; but at the same time we must understand that there are problems that do not have a national solution: radioactive clouds, world oil prices, diseases, the warming of the planet or the hole in the ozone layer. These are not domestic problems." Adopting robust rhetoric, Chávez pointed out to the UN that "the imposed centre of debate has been a so-called reform process that overshadows the most urgent issues, what the peoples of the world claim with urgency: the adoption of measures that deal with the real problems that block and sabotage the efforts made by our countries for real development and life." Instead of the structural reforms tabled, he called for root and branch changes at the UN, including "the expansion of the Security Council in its permanent categories as well as the non-permanent categories", the ending of the veto in decisions taken by the Security Council as being 'elitist' and "incompatible with the principles of equality and democracy", a strengthening of the role of the Secretary General, and a relocation of the UN headquarters from New York to "an international city that must be in the South".

With high oil prices, President Chávez's vision has been given greater impetus and there has been a flurry of activity encompassing agricultural and industrial projects. There appears to be every chance that the revolution will gather momentum. The direction in which President Chávez is taking Venezuela is interesting from a number of perspectives – not least that his revolution is the only new economic model to compete with the dominant and traditional neo-liberal approach. He has undoubtedly instituted a powerful force for change. **F**

Hugo Chávez Frías assumed the office of President of the Republic of Venezuela in 1999 having been elected the previous year. He was born on 28th July 1954 and has two sons and three daughters. He was educated at Liceo O'Leary, Barinas State, at the Venezuelan Military Academy in Caracas and the University of Simón Bolívar. He was a paratrooper in the Venezuelan Army rising to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was the joint founder of Movimiento Revolucionario Bolivariano 200 and the Founder of Movimiento Quinta República.