

A life cut short in the struggle for social justice - a tribute to Hugo Chavez

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The death of Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez last week and the views of his legacy are as controversial as can be. The local Venezuelan elite, global corporations as well as most of the political and economic elites in the Western World have dismissed Chavez as a maverick and this is hardly surprising given his principled and fearless commitment to social and economic justice. Unlike so many other politicians around the world, who make endless election promises and then fail to deliver once in office, Hugo Chavez started out with relatively modest reform programmes but then increased the pace of transformation in the light of the failed coup attempt against him in 2002 and the ongoing attempts to sabotage progress by the local and US-backed opposition.

At the time when Chavez won the presidential elections in late 1998, Venezuela had had several decades of regular political elections but the voters' choice was largely between two parties that shared the same ideological beliefs. Whoever ruled was largely unaccountable to the electorate, appointed its supporters into the judiciary and dominated the trade unions as well as civil society organisations. The country's oil revenue was essentially used for elite self-enrichment and to pay for a network of patronage. Venezuela's economic policies were free-market oriented but this model collapsed in February 1998 when the then government announced that it had to submit to IMF dictates, abolishing food and fuel subsidies, cutting spending on health and education. The resulting hardships affected the poor the worst and resulted in widespread riots. At the end of that year, Hugo Chavez and his "Bolivarian party" (later reconstituted as the United Socialist Party of Venezuela) won the country's national elections and promised to change the political, economic and social landscape through a programme of redistribution and social justice. At the time, Venezuela was characterised by severe apartheid-style social divisions between the affluent elite on the one hand and the impoverished working class on the other. One of the first steps taken by the Chavez government was to embark on a series of far-reaching reforms regarding social service provision, for example, access to housing, education and health care.

The resources needed for these social programmes were derived from the country's oil resources. The national oil company, several large manufacturing companies and much of Venezuela's farmland already belonged to the state by the time the Chavez government was elected but what changed was how these resources were utilised to benefit the poor. The royalty fees payable by private oil companies and an extraction tax was introduced to pay for the extensive, health, housing and education programmes, locally known as "missions". Their success is clearly visible in the form of freely accessible health care, education from literacy classes to tertiary level, vastly broadened for students from poor families, community housing initiatives, community food kitchens etc. Poverty declined dramatically and Venezuela raised minimum wages to the highest level in Latin America in the Chavez era. These minimum wages were also paid to those engaged in "house work" in recognition of their contribution to society.

The initially moderate economic programme of the Chavez government started changing in 2005 when Chavez had survived the failed US-sponsored coup attempt and began to exert some control over the corrupt state administration and oil revenues. Also, the encouragement of social movements began to show visible results and led to self organisation at local level, particularly in the form of community councils. These councils are neighbourhood organisations comprising of 200 – 400 families in urban areas and at least 20 families in rural areas. All council decisions are taken in “citizens’ assemblies” attended by residents who are 15 years and older. These assemblies elect their council executive committee, financial management and monitoring committees as well as thematic committees dealing with particular local priorities such as health, education, land, recreation etc.

The Chavez government was responsive to pressure “from below”. Former workers at a paper mill that had been declared bankrupt and closed by its owners decided to occupy the mill and re-opened it with the support of the local community. Venezuela’s parliamentarians then passed a law allowing for the expropriation of the mill and to let it operate under democratic workers management. Since then, workers started seizing other companies that had closed down. A worker and community-led movement for the “recovery” of companies was born and today over 800 companies are run by workers themselves, producing for local needs. In addition, some private companies in strategic economic sectors like oil and cement production were nationalised.

The process of change in Venezuela is at times contradictory and there were concerns that Venezuela’s “Bolivarian revolution” hinges too strongly on the personality of Chavez and that the community councils are too strongly dependent on funding from the presidency. Critics within Chavez’ own United Socialist Party pointed out that an emerging layer of bureaucrats showed little commitment to the ideals of the revolution and may use political positions of power for personal gain. Chavez himself was very aware of these dangers and regarded participatory democratic structures of mass participation at various levels (such as community councils and banks; worker-run factories; community health centres etc.) as the best defence for the achievements made.

Unlike most liberation movements in Southern Africa, which often demobilised popular movements after coming to power, Chavez encouraged and supported participatory democracy from below. There are certainly inherent dangers of centralising power in the presidency but Chavez was well aware that the old bourgeois state was still alive and kicking and that his government was facing a major challenge “to convert the old counterrevolutionary state into a revolutionary state”.

Venezuela’s journey towards what Chavez called the new “socialism of the 21st century” is work in progress and plays itself out in highly polarised ways: as a conscientised and politicised popular movement emerges from below, it is confronted by state institutions that want to constrain, dilute and co-opt mass struggles in order to maintain the old

order. Thus there is an ongoing struggle to convert the community councils into autonomous organs of community power that exercise power from below over state and party institutions. Hugo Chavez played a key role in enabling such processes and in building an emancipatory Latin American unity against US domination. He fearlessly defended his convictions and was keen to learn from the mistakes of socialist states in the previous century. He stood up to powerful corporate and imperial interests and has shown that progress can be made even under hostile global conditions. Hugo Chavez' death is a huge loss but his legacy will live on.

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