

Seeking United Latin America, Venezuela's Chávez Is a Divider

THE NEW YORK TIMES
May 20, 2006

BOGOTÁ, Colombia, May 19 — As [Venezuela's](#) president, [Hugo Chávez](#), insinuates himself deeper in the politics of his region, something of a backlash is building among his neighbors.



Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, right, with Bolivia's leader, Evo Morales. [More Photos »](#)



[Slide Show: A Uniter and Divider](#)



President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, left, with Daniel Ortega, who is running for president of Nicaragua, before a portrait of Simón Bolívar. [More Photos >](#)

Mr. Chávez — stridently anti-American, leftist and never short on words — has cast himself as spokesman for a united Latin America free of Washington's influence. He has backed Bolivia's recent gas nationalization, set up his own Socialist trade bloc and jumped into the middle of disputes between his neighbors, even when no one has asked.

Some nations are beginning to take umbrage. The mere association with Mr. Chávez has helped reverse the leads of presidential candidates in Mexico and Peru. Officials from Mexico to Nicaragua, Peru and Brazil have expressed rising impatience at what they see as Mr. Chávez's meddling and grandstanding, often at their expense.

Diplomatic sparring has broken into the open. Last month, after very public sniping between Mr. Chávez and Peru's president, [Alejandro Toledo](#), the country withdrew its ambassador from Caracas, citing "flagrant interference" in its affairs.

"He goes around shooting from the hip and shooting his mouth off, and that has caused tensions," Jorge G. Castañeda, a former Mexican foreign minister, said by phone from New York, where he is teaching at [New York University](#). "The difference now is that he's picking fights with his friends, not just his adversaries."

Some of Mr. Chávez's gestures, like his tendency to tweak the Bush administration, or the aid projects he has bankrolled with Venezuela's oil money, still leave him popular, particularly among the poor.

But increasingly, the very image of the Venezuelan leader has come to stand for a style of caustic nationalism that many in the region fear, as the divisions provoked by the man who professes to want to unify his region have widened.

"He is beginning to overreach, wanting to be involved in everything," said Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. "It's a matter of egomania at work here."

Mr. Chávez, for instance, has taken the uncompromising stand that governments must choose either his vision of continental unity or free trade with Washington, which Mr. Chávez blames for impoverishing the region. "You either have one or the other," he said. "Either we're a united community or we're not."

In late April, he exasperated Colombia, Ecuador and Peru by declaring that Venezuela would drop out of their trade group, the Andean Community of Nations, because the other three members were seeking free trade agreements with the United States. He has instead formed a trade bloc with Cuba and Bolivia's new Socialist government.

While the move was filled with political symbolism, analysts say it offers few real prospects for trade and threatens badly needed integration among Andean countries, which still depend on United States markets.

"Chávez's idea of sovereignty seems pretty selective," said Michael Shifter, a senior policy analyst at the Inter-American Dialogue policy group in Washington. "Chávez has been saying, in effect, 'You're either with us or against us.' For most Latin Americans that hubristic message doesn't go over very well, whether it comes from Washington or Caracas."

The sparring with Peru's government erupted last month after President Toledo said it made no sense for Mr. Chávez to criticize his Andean partners for dealing with Washington when Venezuela sells most of its oil to the United States.

But he saved his strongest words for Mr. Chávez's general involvement in Peruvian affairs.

"Mr. Chávez, learn to govern democratically," Mr. Toledo said. "Learn to work with us. Our arms are open to integrate Latin America, but not for you to destabilize us with your checkbook."

When Alan García, a candidate in Peru's June 4 presidential election, also took Mr. Chávez to task, the Venezuelan president responded with, among other things, an endorsement of his opponent.

"I hope that Ollanta Humala becomes president of Peru," Mr. Chávez declared, backing Mr. García's nationalist opponent, who has modeled himself on the Venezuelan leader. "Go, comrade! Long live Ollanta Humala! Long live Peru!"

Mr. Chávez called Mr. García, a former president whose tenure was marred by corruption scandals, "shameless, a thief," and warned that if he were elected "by some work of the devil," Venezuela would withdraw its ambassador.