

Hugo Chavez: the Next Castro?

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The democratic opposition in Cuba and abroad looks to the island's new day, without Fidel Castro at the helm, as a moment of transition. But Castro and his regime's apparatchiks refer instead to a "succession," as though living in a monarchy. Nearly 200 years after Latin American nations began winning independence from imperial Spain, and on a continent that has produced so many wondrous novels about deteriorating despots succumbing to the perils of absolute power, it seems we still can't let go of our kings.

The only problem with succession planning, of course, is that dead dictators can rarely stick around to supervise their elaborate designs. Today, things in Havana seem to be developing much as the ailing Castro desires, with younger brother Raúl assuming control.

Nevertheless, the Shakespearean logic of royal successions suggests that more than one duke of Gloucester will try to crown himself Richard III. The extraordinary difference in this case is that not all the dukes vying to succeed Castro can be found in Cuba. To the south, across the Caribbean, another duke has emerged: Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Indeed, Chávez is the piper leading the most strident anti-Americanism to parade through Latin America since the Bay of Pigs invasion, and his ascent has done much to shape the popular belief that radical left-wing governments modeled after his own will soon dominate the region. But does Chávez really have what it takes to assume Castro's place as the leader of Latin American anti-imperialism? Will he become a permanent pebble in Washington's shoe, as persistent and vexing as Castro, for decades to come?

Certainly, Chávez seems to believe so. However, he is missing much more than the charisma of the receding Cuban leader. He lacks the essential ingredient to take Fidel's place: legitimacy. Castro, for all his faults, earned his anti-American and anti-imperialist stripes. Chávez, awash in petrodollars, is too embedded in the very global system he purports to reject.

Castro sets a high bar for any regional successor, all the more evident now at the moment of his political death.

Consider his superlative permanence in power: 47 years. That is 17 more years than Mexico's Porfirio Díaz, 12 more than Paraguay's Alfredo Stroessner and 11 more than Spain's Francisco Franco. Even North Korea's Kim Il Sung -- the gold standard of aged despots -- totaled only 46 years in power. To match Castro, Chávez would have to remain in office, without interruption, until 2045, past his 90th birthday.

Such prolonged rule is possible only in a totalitarian dictatorship that leaves no space for dissent. In Castro's case, the Cold War helped him win absolute control over Cuban society. With a powerful and ever-present enemy so close, Castro could always manipulate the fear of an imminent invasion to militarize Cuban life. Any opposition was more than political -- it was treasonous. Castro thus governed unencumbered by domestic adversaries.

Chávez, by contrast, lives in a post-Cold War world, his conspiracy theories about the CIA notwithstanding. And in an era of democratic consolidation in Latin America, he has much less room to suppress the opposition at home, no matter how hard he may try.

Despite Castro's unquestioned power base, however, his capacity to disrupt his Latin neighbors, or even to predispose them against *los Yanquis*, has long been overestimated by his sympathizers, including Chávez. Castro's anti-American credentials date to the 1960s, when the Cuban revolution, still imbued with childlike optimism, openly backed leftist guerrilla movements emerging throughout the continent. But one by one, they failed. Indeed, the dictator's supporting role in the Soviet Union's military adventures in Africa during the 1980s came about only after his efforts to spark uprisings closer to home faltered -- a sort of revolutionary diversification strategy. Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, "exporting the revolution" ceased to be a priority for Castro long ago. After the Soviet collapse, survival became more important.

His regional appeal lingered, but in a half-hearted, nostalgic kind of way. Since the late 1980s, Castro has always been the star attraction at the inaugurations of democratically elected presidents throughout Latin America. His presence was a cheap and harmless way for other Latin American leaders to display a modicum of independence from the United States. Yet, as soon as the crazy uncle boarded his flight back to Havana, his erstwhile hosts quickly adopted the pro-market economic policies pushed by Washington and the International Monetary Fund. Castro -- whether wiser or simply older, or both -- looked the other way.

Chávez seems not to understand this hypocritical undertone to our region's anti-Americanism. Recall the Summit of the Americas last November in Mar del Plata, Argentina, where he proclaimed the death of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, a long moribund initiative begun by President George H.W. Bush. Though Chávez garnered great press -- not to mention fun photo ops with Argentine soccer legend Diego Maradona -- many of the Latin American governments that he aspires to lead on his anti-imperialist crusade preferred to keep quietly negotiating trade preferences with the United States.

The rest of the region seems to have internalized the key historical lesson of our long and contradictory relationship with the United States: One rarely crosses Washington without eventually suffering the consequences. Porfirio Díaz's oft-quoted comment "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States" applies to Latin America as a whole. Chávez may seek to lead, but few may opt to follow.

In two centuries of U.S.-Latin American cohabitation on this continent, few leaders have been as consistent champions of anti-Americanism as Castro. His charisma, at home and abroad, surely played a role. But the longtime U.S. trade embargo against the impoverished island also gave Castro the political and (paradoxically) moral legitimacy of a proud Caribbean David standing up to the menacing northern Goliath. Poverty, in a perverse way, legitimizes anti-imperialism and its modern-day variants, anti-Americanism and anti-globalism. It also helps explain why even Castro's bitter enemies recognize and respect his unbreakable attitude -- one that is the basis of the feelings he inspires among many of the region's residents.

Chávez, to put it mildly, does not inspire such emotions. Despite his integrationist rhetoric and efforts to buy allies (such as by acquiring big chunks of Argentine debt), he has become a divisive force, succeeding only in winning new enemies -- or at least losing friends -- throughout Latin America. His ties with fellow lefty head of state Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil deteriorated severely, for example, after Chávez encouraged Bolivian President Evo Morales to nationalize energy holdings, thus jeopardizing the investments of Brazil's state-owned oil company in Bolivia. True to himself, Chávez probably will make the mistake of seeking to broker, in his antagonistic and backhanded way, the coming internal battles in Cuba.

Chávez has also heaped scorn upon Latin American governments that seek to improve their citizens' economic prospects by quietly negotiating free-trade agreements with Washington. Yet Venezuela's president enjoys the benefits of his own informal trade agreement with the United States; after all, Venezuela is one of the most dependable oil suppliers to the United States. In the first five months of 2006 alone, Venezuela exported nearly 1.2 million barrels of crude oil per day to the United States, putting it in fourth place after Canada, Mexico and Saudi Arabia. With a wallet full of petrodollars, Chávez can fund an arms buildup and social programs at home while trying to export his Bolivarian ideals throughout the region.

Unlike Castro, Chávez has found the profitable path to anti-imperialism. But it is a devil's bargain for Chávez, because such riches only erode the legitimacy he needs to lead a crusade against Washington. For how can you claim the anti-American and anti-globalization mantle when you so obviously benefit from both America and globalization? Chávez's Venezuela feels less vanguard than throwback -- the textbook case of a populist Latin American petrostate degenerating into an illiberal democracy, militarist as well as corrupt.

Absent Fidel, it is reasonable to expect that other leaders in the region may also aspire to become the new voice of whatever latent opposition to the United States remains. Chávez has neither the temperament nor the skill to beat out Lula, or Peru's Alan García, or even Mexico's conservative Felipe Calderón -- why not? -- for that role.

As quaint or misguided as it may sound today, true anti-imperialist leadership in Latin America still requires old-fashioned guts and commitment. Much of the mythology surrounding Latin America's crusader par excellence, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, resides in the

fact that, even through the manner of his death, he stuck to his guns. Castro, also true to his rhetoric, nationalized the Standard Oil affiliate in Cuba after the Bay of Pigs fiasco and stood up to the U.S. embargo for decades. But Chávez, his anti-American bluster notwithstanding, is still dealing with the Chevron Corporation.

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